Exploring the sense of belonging felt by adolescent females with autism in mainstream school: what can we learn about their social experiences?

Submitted by Olivia Myles to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Educational, Child and Community Psychology in May 2017

I certify that all material in this thesis which is not my own work has been identified and that no material has previously been submitted and approved for the award of a degree by this or
any other University.

Signed
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Date .....

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Abstract

This two phase qualitative study explored the social experiences of adolescent females with autism and how they can be supported most effectively in mainstream school. The first phase of the research gained the views of eight adolescent females with autism. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore the ways in which they experience a sense of belonging and exclusion in school; and what they feel would support them socially. The second phase of the research sought the views of the parents and school staff who support adolescent females with autism. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were used to explore their views regarding the social challenges of mainstream school for adolescent females with autism; and the support and provision needed to address the concerns and challenges identified by the pupils in phase one.

The findings across both phases suggest that key friendships, understanding and perceived social competence are important for adolescent females with autism in developing a sense of belonging in mainstream school. Adolescent females with autism are motivated to form a sense of belonging in school, but experience pressure to adapt their behaviour and minimise their differences in order to gain acceptance. The findings also identify good practice and areas for development in regards to effective support for adolescent females with autism in mainstream school.

1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

Since the initial description of autism in the 1940's, there has been a pronounced sex difference, with the most commonly suggested male: female ratio being 4:1 (Andersson, Gillberg & Miniscalco, 2013). This is thought to be higher for individuals at the high-functioning end of the spectrum (Fombonne, Quirke & Hagen, 2011). There are various explanations for this sex difference including: male bias in the current diagnostic criteria, protective or compensatory factors in females and gender-specific profiles of autism (Nasen, 2016). Furthermore, this sex difference could mean that the experiences and needs of females with autism are not being recognised or properly addressed.

In recent years, there has been an increased awareness that autism presents differently in males and females (Nichols, Moravcik & Tetenbaum, 2009). Females with autism are better able to mask their difficulties (Gould & Ashton-Smith, 2011) and tend not to receive a diagnosis until a later stage (Begeer, Mandell, Wijnker-Holmes, Venderbosch, Rem, Stekelenburg & Koot, 2013). Missed or late diagnosis could be associated with the increased social isolation and greater risk for mental health difficulties within this population (Wilkinson, 2008). With the majority of research to date using predominantly male samples, there is little known about the first hand experiences of females with autism and how to support their social and emotional well-being most effectively.

Autism awareness in schools has increased significantly over the last two decades, however it is suggested that teachers are less aware of how autism presents in females and how to support their needs (Moyse & Porter, 2015). The social impairments, isolation and social exclusion of females with autism can increase the likelihood that they fall "under the radar" in the school environment (Nasen, 2016, p. 10). Due to the more subtle presentation of symptoms in females with autism, this could mean that they do not receive the social and emotional support they require. The importance of increasing the understanding of school staff was recently promoted by the Times Educational Supplement; with an article calling for more research into the experiences of females with autism and how to create

"a school system where they can thrive and feel accepted" (Lee, 2016, p.34). This is supported by research studies, which identify a need for further exploration into issues for adolescents with autism that are specific to females (Cridland, Jones, Caputi & Magee, 2014; Tierney, Burns & Kilbey 2016).

The current study aims to consider this gap in the literature by exploring, first-hand, the social experiences of adolescent females with autism. It also seeks the views of their parents and school staff as to how the concerns and challenges identified by the pupils can be addressed within school.

1.2 Sex differences in autism

Autism is characterised within the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems 10th Revision (ICD-10) (World Health Organisation, 2010) by the presence of: abnormal or impaired development before three years of age; and abnormal functioning in communication, reciprocal social interaction, and restricted, stereotyped or repetitive behaviour. The definition of Asperger syndrome is the same, except that it does not include a general delay in language or cognitive development. The Fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) provides a similar definition, but has removed Asperger syndrome as a separate diagnosis. The collective term Autism Spectrum Disorder is used for autism-related disorders. Throughout this study, the terms "autism" and "autistic" are used to reflect all aspects of the spectrum, including Asperger syndrome.

The prevalence of autism has increased gradually over the last four decades and it is currently estimated to affect approximately one percent of the population (Baron-Cohen, Scot, Allison, Williams, & Bolton, 2009). One of the earliest descriptions of autism emerged from the work of Kanner (1943), who identified a number of shared characteristics in a sample of 11 children. He suggested that these children were displaying early infantile autism. Kanner's sample consisted of 8 males and 3 females and from this point onwards, research into autism has tended to include predominantly male samples. This could be due to autism

affecting more males than females. However, it may be that the current understanding of the condition is biased towards males, which results in females going undiagnosed (Dworzynski, Ronald, Bolton & Happé, 2012).

Hypotheses regarding sex differences in autism are now discussed. Consistent with the aims of this research, it will be considered as to how significant social factors are in explaining the prevalence of autism in females compared to males.

Presentation of autism in males and females

The Brain Differences Theory suggests that sex differences in autism are the result of fundamental differences between the female and male brain structure, patterns of activation and hormones. Baron-Cohen's (2002) Extreme Male Brain theory proposes that male brains are naturally programmed to understand and build systems, while female brains are better at empathising. Therefore, it is proposed that females are less susceptible to autism because their sex makes them more socially competent. This implies that autism is likely to present differently in females compared to males, due to their superior empathy and social skills. It could also explain why females are more likely to receive a diagnosis of autism later than males. A number of studies suggest that there is a difference in the social presentation of males and females with autism. For example, Hsiao et al (2013) found that male children with autism were less socially emotional, less socially aware and had fewer autism traits overall than female children with autism. Meanwhile Head, McGillivray and Stokes (2014) found that, compared to males with and without autism, females were more likely to have close, empathetic and supportive relationships with others, regardless of whether they had a diagnosis of autism. It should be noted that these and many other studies in to the expression of autism in males and females, relied largely on parent reports. It is suggested by Kopp and Gillberg (2011) that parents and professionals may overlook the social difficulties of females with autism, due to gendered-expectations. Therefore it could be that males and females with autism experience similar difficulties with social skills and reciprocity, but these are more often picked up in males. It may be that females are expected to demonstrate more empathy and social sensitivity than males, which influences how their behaviour

is interpreted. It is therefore important for research to further explore how females with autism are perceived by themselves and by others.

There is some existing research into the presentation of autism in males and females which have also included self-report measures. Lai et al (2011) found that, compared to males with autism, females with autism demonstrated less autistic behaviour on the social communication domains of the ADOS (Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule Second Edition). However, they scored higher than males on a self-report measure of autism symptoms. This could suggest that the symptoms of autism in females are less severe than those of males, but females are more aware of their difficulties; and more able to hide them. On the other hand, it could be that diagnostic tools such as the ADOS use male-biased markers of autism and are less sensitive to symptoms as they present in females. For example, Van Wijngaarden-Cremers, Van Eeten, Groen, Van Deurzen, Oosterling and Van der Gaag (2014) found that males with autism show more repetitive behaviour, compared to females with autism. If repetitive behaviour is used as one of the key diagnostic criteria, it may be that autism in females is more likely to be missed. As suggested by Lai et al (2011, 2015), there may be a need to revise existing diagnostic procedures, giving greater consideration to female-specific symptoms and increasing diagnostic equity.

The developmental trajectory of males and females

There are differences in the developmental trajectories of males and females from an early age. Female infants have been found to demonstrate more prosocial behaviour than male infants (Takahashi, Okada, Hoshino & Anme, 2015), to have more advanced speech and to have better social imitation skills (Rivet & Matson, 2011). However, this is often not recognised by research into sex differences in autism. Furthermore, the literature suggests that the expression of autism in females is significantly influenced by their stage of development in relation to the demands of the social environment. In their early years, females with autism have been found to show less impaired social communication than males with autism (Rivet & Matson, 2011). However, they tend to demonstrate greater difficulty with friendships than males with autism as they enter adolescence; this being a

period during which there are increased social demands and female friendships become highly dependent on communication, empathy and social sensitivity (Kopp & Gillberg, 2011). It may therefore be that the symptoms of females with autism are more intense and expressed more apparently at a later stage of development. This highlights the need to consider the impact of the social environment and expectations on the social functioning of adolescent females with autism. The social deficits of females with autism may not emerge until they experience certain female-specific challenges. It is therefore particularly important for research to explore these challenges, so as to inform parents, schools and professionals how to support females most effectively during adolescence.

The 'female camouflage effect'

It is suggested that females with autism have a greater need for social contact and interaction than boys with autism, which motivates them to learn ways of appearing socially-typical (Hsiao et al, 2013). Gould and Ashton-Smith (2011) propose that females with autism are able to give the impression that they have well-developed social skills by watching and mirroring the behaviour of others. There is a growing body of research into the ability of females with autism to camouflage their difficulties in this way. Some of this evidence is based on anecdotal accounts such as that of Holliday Willey (2015), who describes the effort she put into 'pretending to be normal' for much of her life. More recently, studies have begun to directly examine social camouflaging in females with autism. Tierney et al (2016) interviewed adolescent females with autism and found that camouflaging was a strategy that they commonly used to make and maintain social relationships. Hull et al (2017) obtained similar findings from their research based on adults with autism; which suggested that motivations for camouflaging included the desire to fit in and to build connections with others. Whilst these studies provide useful insights in to the function and nature of camouflaging, they do not consider differences in camouflaging behaviours between males and females. Rynkiewicz et al (2016) suggest one of the ways in which females with autism camouflage their social difficulties is through their non-verbal communication. This research, based on a polish sample, found that female children with autism used physical gestures more vividly and noticeably

than male children with autism. However, the females with autism performed worse than males with autism on a test which required them to identify emotions depicted in photographs. The authors suggest that because females with autism appear more able than males with autism in regards to their non-verbal communication, they are able to camouflage their diagnostic features. This increases the likelihood that autism in females is missed. Further research is required before these findings can be generalised to children with autism in the UK, but the findings provide further support for the proposal to revise diagnostic assessments so that they are appropriate for both males and females. In order for this to happen, there is a need for research that continues to explore and refine what is known about the social experiences and coping strategies of females with autism, particularly during adolescence, when the need for social acceptance is especially prominent. The current research will consider whether the extent to which adolescent females with autism experience a sense of belonging impacts on their use of social coping strategies such as camouflaging. Furthermore, it will allow for exploration into whether camouflaging methods contribute to them feeling accepted and valued within the school environment.

For me, a key question arising from each of these theories is how females with autism experience what is suggested to be a typically male condition. Regardless of the reason underlying the sex differences in autism, females with this diagnosis are a minority group and must contend with a number of characteristics that set them apart from their peers. It is recognised that individuals with autism experience a range of social challenges (Hochman, Carter, Bottema-Beutel, Harvey & Gustafson, 2015). However, due to the combination of their diagnosis and their gender, the challenges for females with autism are unique.

1.3 Social challenges for females with autism

It is proposed that the communicative and social nature of female friendships in adolescence is particularly demanding for females on with autism (Kopp & Gillberg, 2011). However, the nature of female social interactions is also suggested to make it easier for females with autism to mask their social challenges; through behaviour such as staying close to peers and moving between

activities (Dean, Harwood & Kasari, 2016). The social challenges of males with autism may be more detectable due to the higher likelihood of visible social isolation; as well as the differences in social behaviour. Females with autism are more likely to 'cling' to other people, rather than exhibiting "extreme autistic aloneness" (Rivet & Matson, 2011, p. 971).

Difficulties with social understanding and communication can make it hard for females with autism to develop relationships and fit in with their typically developing peers (Cridland et al., 2014). This could contribute to the higher rates of social isolation and mental health difficulties (such as anxiety, depression and eating disorders) in females with autism (Nichols et al., 2009; Solomon, Miller, Taylor, Hinshaw & Carter, 2012). It is suggested that internalising symptomology in females with autism may go unrecognised, due to their tendency to hide their differences (Dworzynski et al., 2012). Therefore, research eliciting the first hand perspectives of females with autism is important to increase our understanding of their social experiences and the factors that are likely to impact on their mental health and well-being.

The UK Prime Minister, Theresa May recently announced proposals to "transform" attitudes to mental health and to provide mental health first aid training to all secondary schools in England (BBC News, January, 2017). This demonstrates the government's current drive towards supporting adolescent mental health in schools. Considering the proposed link between mental health and a sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) there are surprisingly few studies that have explored this construct for females with autism. The exploration of belonging in mainstream schools is particularly relevant, given recent guidance from the Department for Education (DfE, 2015) on mental health and behaviour in schools. This document emphasises the need to develop pupils' sense of belonging within their school environment in order to promote their mental health. The complexities of female peer relationships and concerns around fitting in make adolescence a critical time for females with autism (Nichols et al., 2009). Furthermore, exploring the factors that impact on sense of belonging for adolescent females with autism may lead to a more advanced understanding of how to support their mental health needs.

1.4 The need for belonging

The importance of experiencing a sense of belonging is well-established within the literature. In his hierarchical theory of motivation, Maslow (1987) proposed that progression towards achieving self-esteem or self-actualisation is dependent on humans fulfilling their needs for love and belongingness. Maslow bases this on the notion that individuals have an intrinsic desire for relations with other people, specifically, for a place in the group. As noted by Baumeister and Leary (1995), Maslow's theory is derived mostly from clinical experience and not accompanied by either original data or a review of past research. Baumeister and Leary nevertheless support the notion of belonging as a basic psychological need. Following their extensive review of the literature they concluded that lack of belonging is associated with higher incidence of maladjustment, stress, psychological pathology and health problems. This indicates that there is a universal human motivation to develop stable, fulfilling relationships with other individuals and that lack of belonging can have significant consequences for well-being.

The need to belong still seems very apparent by the overwhelming popularity and success of social networking sites such as Facebook (Gangadharbatla, 2008). The need and motivation to belong has also been demonstrated by real life studies into individuals' peer group relationships, occupational settings, school settings and various life transitions (Levett-Jones, Lathlean, Maguire & McMillan, 2007; Newman, Lohman & Newman, 2007; Osterman, 2000; Pesonen et al., 2015).

1.4.1 Definitions

Belonging

Whilst the significance of belonging is made apparent within the literature, it is suggested that this concept lacks clear definition (Sancho & Cline, 2012). It therefore seems important to establish the definition of belonging which will serve as the basis from which to explore this construct. Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema and Collier (1992, p. 173) have defined a sense of belonging as "the

experience of personal involvement in a system or environment, so that a person feels themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment."

Hagerty et al. (1992) undertook a concept analysis of "belongingness" and identified two defining attributes. The first is "valued involvement", which is described as the experience of feeling valued, needed and accepted. The second is "fit", which is the individual's perception that their characteristics articulate with or complement the system or environment. This model of belonging seems particularly relevant as a basis from which to explore the experiences of adolescents who may have reason to feel different, or in a minority.

Identity

It is suggested that belonging is an important component of identity (Kestenberg & Kestenberg, 1988), as it leads individuals to develop an understanding of the people and groups that shape and influence to who they are. Within this research paper, the term identity is understood as "the way a person understands and views himself, and is often viewed by others" (Holland, Lachicotte Jr, Skinner, & Cain, 1998, p.68). Whilst the concept of identity is not the central focus of this study, it is referred to within the discussion of the literature and the findings, due to its relevance to belonging. The literature highlights the difficulties adolescents can have in accepting autism as part of their identity, due to their desire to fit in and appear normal (Carrington & Graham, 2001; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). Furthermore, hiding one's autism to fit with the majority group is associated with negative psychological well-being (Bagatell, 2007). The current study considers how, as a minority group, adolescent females with autism view themselves in relation to others and the impact of this on their sense of belonging.

Psychological well-being

The psychological wellbeing of adolescent females with autism is a concern, with this population reported to be at high risk of mental health problems (Solomon et al., 2012). Within this research, psychological well-being is understood as the

extent to which an individual experiences autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance (Ryff, 1989).

The literature suggests that feeling accepted and relating to others is a basic psychological need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and critical for well-being (Deci, Vallerland, Pelletier & Ryan, 1991). Furthermore, it is proposed that belonging to a group provides social and psychological support, as well as protection and access to important resources (Duncan et al, 2007). Positive connections with others can therefore offer reliable alliance, self-validation and emotional security (Majors, 2012). This is particularly important for adolescents within a school environment, as the quality of their social relationships and their sense of belonging is suggested to impact on the extent to which they engage with and enjoy school (Goodenow, 1993). The current research aims to explore the extent to which a sense of belonging impacts on the school experiences of adolescent females with autism; and the social factors that affect how happy and comfortable they feel in this environment.

1.5 Purpose and aims of this study

The proposed study addresses the need to better understand the lived social experiences of adolescent females with autism at mainstream school by exploring factors that add to and take away from their sense of belonging. Specifically, I aim to capture the meaning and significance of 'sense of belonging' for adolescent females with autism and the impact that this has on their social experiences at school. The study also explores the perspectives of school staff and parents of adolescent females with autism; and the support and provision that they feel is needed to address the social challenges identified by the pupils. Overall, the research seeks to add to the small knowledgebase regarding the needs of females with autism, their experiences of mainstream school and how they may be supported most effectively.

This is particularly important if we are to better understand the priorities of females with autism and any factors impeding their well-being within the school

environment. The research also has relevance for professional practice; particularly for educational psychologists (EPs), who continue to focus on autism as part of their work (Gilling, 2012). EPs are well placed to work with school staff to develop their awareness of how autism presents in females and how they can support their learning and well-being most effectively.

2. Literature Review

The aim of the following literature review is to provide a context for the current study and to explain how it contributes to the existing body of knowledge in this area (Boote & Beile, 2005).

2.1 Search strategy

A literature search was carried out electronically, using a range of sources including EBSCO, British Education Index, ERIC and Education Research Complete. Key words included 'females with autism', 'social experiences of females with autism', 'females with autism and peer acceptance' and 'females with autism and group membership'. This database search generated 9,325 results. I also consulted key texts, journal articles and websites on the topic of autism in females. Seven key papers were selected based on their relevance to the key words and the research focus. A paper by Pesonen, Kontu and Pirttimaa (2015), examining the sense of belonging for two women with autism, led to further exploration of the literature around belonging for females with autism in the school environment. Key words included 'sense of belonging', 'autism and belonging', 'belonging and mental health', 'females with autism and belonging'. This search generated 2,744 results and led to the selection of a further five key papers on the basis that they provided an overview of the concept of belonging and were relevant to the focus of the research. Additionally, the references within particular articles led to the discovery of other relevant studies, book chapters, websites and documentation.

The literature review will take a narrative, rather than a systematic approach and will therefore be less explicit about the criteria for studies included (Bryman, 2012). It aims to provide a general overview of the field of study through a critical evaluation of the literature.

2.2 Sense of belonging within the school environment

The literature would suggest that educational outcomes and well-being are influenced by a variety of contextual factors; one of which is the quality of school social relationships. An aspect of the social context which is proposed to influence education is a pupil's sense of belonging or psychological membership in school (Goodenow, 1993). Positive associations have been identified between school belonging and academic effort, educational expectations, academic self-efficacy and positive self-affect (Sanchez, Colon & Esparza, 2005; Jose, Ryan & Pryor, 2012). Furthermore, it seems that a sense of school belonging has notable implications for attendance and school completion. It has been found that young people who do not feel that they fit in at school and who are socially isolated are more likely to disengage or drop out of school (Dupéré, Leventhal, Dion, Crosnoe, Archambault & Janosz, 2015; Havik, Bru & Ertesvåg, 2015). The need for belonging and acceptance is thought to be particularly relevant during adolescence, when young people start exploring who they are; approaching peers and adults outside their family for guidance (Erikson, 1980). Adolescents are described as being at high risk for feelings of isolation and uncertainty, so the need to belong and have valued membership in a setting is likely to take priority over all else (Goodenow, 1993). This clearly has an important impact on young people's experience of school and their future outcomes. However, in order to instil a sense of belonging in their pupils, schools need to have a good understanding of the factors that make this more or less likely.

There is some debate around whether enhancing pupils' sense of belonging is a realistic priority for schools in the current educational context. It has been argued that, due to pressures around exam results and league tables, schools are likely to focus on their pupils' academic performance over their social and emotional needs (Osterman, 2000). However, recent advice from the DfE indicates a current drive for schools to be able to identify and support the social, emotional and mental health needs of their pupils. Mental health and behaviour guidance in schools (DfE, 2015) proposes that schools should be "a safe and affirming place for children where they can develop a sense of belonging" (p.8), and recognises belonging as a protective factor for mental health. This would imply that schools should be competent in fulfilling this area of need, but it is unclear whether they

are aware of the factors that can enhance their pupils' sense of belonging in school.

2.2.1 The importance of social relationships for belonging in school

Juvonen (2006) suggests that a sense of belonging in school is influenced by the pupil's relationships with their peers and teachers; an idea that is reflected by findings in the literature. Using qualitative methods, Sancho and Cline (2012) found that pupils who had recently transitioned to secondary school identified teachers as a key factor regarding their sense of belonging. It was important for teachers to know them and to be available to support them with worries and emotional needs. Peer acceptance was also found to be central in establishing a sense of belonging. This was a very small scale study, so the findings cannot be generalised. However, the impact of social relationships on education and well-being has been widely established by research on a larger scale (Ladd, 1999; Ladd, Kochenderfer & Coleman, 1996).

Peer groups are proposed to be important for the development of identity, self-esteem, positive self-concept and sense of belonging; particularly during the physical and psychological adjustment of adolescence (Erikson, 1968; Cusick, 1973; Newman & Newman, 1976). Furthermore, peer rejection has been associated with increased risk for poor academic outcomes (Kupersmidt & Coie, 1990) and internalising behaviour (Coie, Terry, Lenox, Lochman & Hyman, 1995). Due to the correlational nature of these studies, caution needs to be taken when speculating about direct causal links between these variables. This may be an oversimplified explanation of the link between group belonging and well-being.

Jetten, Haslam, Haslam, Dingle and Jones (2014) propose that we need to consider the effect of shared identity if we are to understand the association between belonging to social groups and well-being. They base this on the principles of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and self-categorisation theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher & Wetherell, 1987), which consider how the self-concept is influenced by group membership. Jetten et al. (2014) propose

that the social identity derived from group membership allows us to understand ourselves as part of a larger collective. This shared identity provides individuals with psychological resources to cope with life stressors and therefore promotes well-being. This is a reasonably comprehensive explanation, but fails to consider whether all individuals possess a need for belonging to the same extent. This is important in order for schools to be aware of whether there are pupils who are particularly vulnerable to the effects of diminished belonging.

It is suggested that individuals differ in their need for interaction and acceptance, which affects their perception and experience of belonging (Rosenberg, 1979; Osterman, 2000). Wong and Csikszentmihalyi (1991) found that pupils with a high need for affiliation spent more time thinking about social interaction, compared to their peers with lower needs. Moreover, these needs and experiences were found to vary by gender. Females had a higher need for affiliation, chose to spend more time in social interactions with peers and reported that they enjoyed that time. This could suggest that developing a sense of belonging has particular relevance for females.

2.2.2 The significance of belonging for females

The female pupils in Goodenow's (1993) research with adolescents reported a greater sense of school belonging than the male pupils. This may be related to the variation in peer relationships and social expectations of females, compared to males. Gilligan (1982) suggests that females place more importance on relatedness and connection with others, while males are more competitive. This is supported by large scale studies finding that adolescent females tend to value group membership more than males (Brown & Lohr, 1987), report higher levels of group identification (Kiesner, Cadinu, Poulin & Bucci, 2002) and desire more nurturing, intimate behaviour from their friends (Newman et al., 2007). This could indicate that, compared to males, females have a greater need for belonging and are more motivated to meet this need. It could be argued that males are therefore less likely to experience the benefits associated with belonging. On the other hand, due to their concern and investment in peer group membership, females may be more vulnerable to the adverse effects of peer rejection, isolation and lack

of belonging. This idea is supported by the higher levels of internalising problems in females compared to males (Leadbeater, Kuperminc, Blatt & Hertzog, 1999).

For some females, their differences may create barriers to peer relationships, group membership and fitting in at school. For example, Pesonen et al. (2015, p.81) present the retrospective accounts of two women with autism; reflecting their experiences of "pretending to be normal" and trying to "fit in", in order to feel a sense of belonging. Despite their attempts to hide their autism they still encountered instances of bullying and alienation in life, which adversely impacted on their well-being. The retrospective nature of this Finnish study means that the findings do not necessarily represent the experiences of UK pupils today. However, they raise questions about sense of belonging in younger females with autism, which will now be considered in more depth.

2.3 The significance of belonging for females with autism

Recent findings suggest that the number of females being diagnosed with autism has grown in the last few years (Lai, Lombardo, Auyeung, Chakrabarti & Baron-Cohen, 2015). Clearly there is much to learn about females on the autistic spectrum, who have been described as "research orphans" (Bazelon, 2007). The fact that females with autism are in such a minority raises questions about the extent to which they experience a sense of belonging within their school environment and the implications this has for their psychological well-being.

2.3.1 Social isolation and mental health

Compared to males with autism, females with autism have been found to show more internalising symptoms such as anxiety and depression when they enter adolescence (Solomon et al., 2012). This partly reflects a normal pattern expected within this age group (Twenge & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2002). However, Solomon et al. concluded that adolescent females with autism also experience more internalising symptoms and social isolation than typically developing females. It is suggested that adolescent females with autism are at high risk of loneliness, failure, frustration, and an unmet desire for friendships or relationships (Nichols et

al., 2009). Their increased risk of mental health problems may therefore be associated with their social difficulties, which make it harder to form and maintain peer relationships. Given that females are thought to place high importance on belonging and group membership (Brown & Lohr, 1987), this would leave females with autism very vulnerable in terms of their mental health; particularly during adolescence when the need for social support and acceptance is so prominent (Goodenow, 1993). Nevertheless, Attwood (2006) identifies that females with autism are more likely than males to be 'mothered' by same sex peers which could be seen as a protective factor.

Mothering from peers may however, be more relevant during the primary school years. McLennan, Lord and Schopler (1993) found that males with autism tend to have more difficulties with social and communicative impairments early in life, but females with autism showed more of these difficulties during adolescence. This is not the only study to suggest that females with autism may be at more of a disadvantage than males when it comes to developing and maintaining peer relationships in adolescence. Hsiao, Tseng, Huang and Gau (2013) found a relation between autistic-like social deficits and problems with peers, including bullying and peer rejection. They concluded that this association was stronger in adolescent females with autism, compared to males with autism. This reflects the findings of Holtmann, Bölte and Poustka, (2007) that females with autism were rated as having more social problems than males with autism on the Child Behaviour Checklist. The lack of qualitative data in these studies prevented further exploration of the findings. Furthermore, both are limited by their reliance on parent reports. An alternative explanation is that parents expect more socially desirable behaviour from their daughters, compared to their sons, resulting in biased interpretations of their social difficulties. Indeed, societal expectations of typical female behaviour contrast with the behavioural patterns associated with autism.

2.3.2 Barriers to feeling valued and accepted

Faherty (2006) suggests that females are affected by autism in some similar ways to males, but are "doubly challenged by the added assumptions that society places

on the female gender" (p.12). Females with autism often struggle with stereotypical female behaviours such as good communication, empathy and social skills. Additionally, personal hygiene, grooming and choice of clothes can bring about sensory challenges and may therefore be neglected. This is in contrast to stereotypical gender expectations around behaviour and appearance and could therefore prevent females with autism gaining acceptance from their female peers (Nichols et al., 2009). Grotevant (1992) suggests that when society does not value characteristics that are out of a person's control, the individual is likely to experience difficulties with low self-esteem.

It is proposed that, in order to manage the pressure to behave like a 'typical female', females with autism tend to mirror the social behaviour of others. Attwood (2006) suggests that females with Asperger syndrome mirror the mannerisms of people who are socially skilled and memorise scripts of real life conversations, adopting a superficial competence in this area. This could suggest that females with autism are motivated by a need to fit in and belong, just like typically developing females.

However, it has been proposed that that both males and females with autism present with behaviour and cognition associated with extreme maleness. Baron-Cohen's (2002) Extreme Male Brain theory proposes that typically, men are better than women at systemising, which is the drive to analyse a system and define the underlying rules and patterns. Meanwhile, women are more able to empathise, which is the drive to identify and respond to another person's emotions and thoughts. These are skills that are important for social relationships. Baron-Cohen (2002) further suggests that both males and females with autism possess an extreme of the normal male profile, where systemising is hyper-developed and empathising is hypo-developed. This implies that females with autism are likely to be more similar to males than females in terms of their behaviour and thought processes. From this point of view it could be argued that, like males, females with autism place less importance on a sense of belonging and group membership than typically developing females. Due to the lack of studies exploring sense of belonging in adolescent females with autism it is difficult to determine how salient or important this is for them.

2.3.3 Where do females with autism 'fit in'?

Females with autism have the added challenge of living with a condition primarily associated with the opposite sex. Their autism sets them apart from other females, but their gender differentiates them from males with autism. This could have an impact on the extent to which they can relate to and fit in with others. Due to the low number of females with this diagnosis it may be difficult for these individuals to meet other females with autism; especially for females who attend mainstream school, where there are likely to be even fewer females identified (Moyse & Porter, 2015). Research into young people with disabilities found that some appreciated the diversity in their friendships and felt part of a group, despite being different (Iantaffi, Jarvis & Sinka, 2003). However, this sample only included young people with hearing impairments and therefore may not apply to individuals with autism.

The few studies that have elicited the perspectives of females with autism suggest that they are aware of feeling different to their female peers. Cridland et al. (2014) explored the experiences of adolescent females with autism by interviewing mother-daughter dyads. Participants spoke about the experience of "being surrounded by boys" (p.1265) and tending to get on better with male peers. They also discussed the complexity of relationships with female peers and the difficulty of forming friendships with typically developing females. These findings identify challenges for females with autism in terms of social interactions and fitting in at school. However, it remains relatively unclear how important the participants felt it was to feel accepted and included by their female peers; and how these experiences affected their sense of belonging in school. Furthermore, the findings seem more heavily based on the views expressed by the mothers, as opposed to the females themselves. This may have been down to the methods employed. The joint interviews involved participants being presented with a suggestion of topics and asked to draw upon those that related to their experiences. While this allowed participants to speak freely, the lack of structure and non-specific questioning may have meant that the format was more effective in eliciting responses from the mothers, rather than the females. The study may have elicited richer data by

interviewing the females individually and by using more visual, 'autism friendly' forms of communication.

Eliciting the perspectives of females with autism is particularly important if we are to have a better understanding of their experiences, views and motivation regarding their sense of belonging in school. It could be argued that the findings of Cridland et al. (2014) support Baron Cohen's (2002) idea that females with autism are likely to feel different, due to possessing a stereotypical male cognitive profile. However, the findings of recent studies into the social motivation of females with autism are less consistent with this explanation.

2.3.4 How important is a sense of belonging for females with autism?

There is a common view that individuals with autism are disinterested in making and maintaining relationships with others and that their social motivation is fundamentally diminished (Chevallier, Kohls, Troiani, Brodkin & Schultz, 2012). However, there is increasing evidence to suggest that this may not always be the case. Calder, Hill and Pellicano (2013) interviewed autistic pupils in mainstream schools and found that while some expressed a strong desire for peer relationships, others preferred having limited social connections. This highlights a need for schools to consider whether pupils with autism actually want increased social involvement before they attempt to support them with this. Only 3 of the 12 participants in this study were females, but they each expressed a strong motivation to engage with their peers. This could imply that compared to males, females with autism have more intrinsic motivation to seek acceptance and fit in with their peers. However, the small number of female participants means that no reliable conclusions can be drawn from this finding. Nevertheless, recent research by Sedgewick, Hill, Yates, Pickering and Pellicano (2016) used a larger sample and concluded that the social motivation and friendship quality of females with autism is similar to that of females without autism. Males with autism reported less social motivation and qualitatively different friendships than males without autism and all females. This could suggest that females with and without autism experience the same need for social contact and acceptance. However, it should be

noted that Sedgewick et al. (2016) recruited their entire sample from special education settings.

Tierney et al. (2016) also found that females with autism are motivated to form friendships, using a sample that included some females in mainstream settings. The study focused specifically on the social coping strategies employed by adolescent females with autism and identified various masquerading strategies used by the pupils to hide or manage social difficulties. The authors acknowledge the need for further investigation in to this area and therefore, the current study aims to add to the findings of Tierney et al. As well as exploring the social aspects of the school environment that are challenging, this study will consider those that work well and which are perceived as supportive by adolescent females with autism. Furthermore, whilst Tierney et al. captured the first hand experiences of females with autism, they did not go on to explore the provision or adjustments needed to enhance the school experience of these pupils. This is particularly important if schools are to support the social and emotional well-being of females with autism most effectively.

2.4 The role of mainstream school in enhancing the sense of belonging and social experiences of females with autism

It is proposed that mainstream schools would benefit from an increased awareness and understanding of the unique social needs of females with autism (Gould & Ashton-Smith, 2011). Very few studies have explored teachers' understanding of how autism presents in females. A frequent finding by those that have is that their knowledge is limited, or that their understanding of autism applies more to males (Cridland et al., 2014).

It is suggested that the academic ability of some pupils with autism can mean that their difficulties managing the social demands of mainstream school are given little consideration (Moore, 2007). This may be even more likely with female pupils with autism, who often hide their difficulties navigating the social world (Attwood, 2007). Whilst school staff have the responsibility of identifying and supporting the well-being needs of their female pupils with autism, the lack of

research and guidance in this particular area may be a barrier to doing so effectively.

2.4.1 Promoting social inclusion in mainstream schools

It is widely proposed that effective inclusion of pupils with autism remains a challenge for mainstream schools (Robertson, Chamberlain & Kasari, 2003; Symes & Humphrey, 2010).

A number of retrospective studies have explored the school experiences of individuals with autism; identifying their feelings of social isolation in the school setting, as well as difficulties with social communication and interaction (Muller, Schuler & Yates, 2008; Parsons, 2015; Pesonen et al., 2015). Participants recognised these challenges as being the result of limited support from school around social skills. Studies of this design are valuable in capturing the views and experiences of autistic individuals around social inclusion, but do not reflect the experiences of today's pupils whose social experiences are influenced by factors such as their online activity and social media.

2.4.2 Understanding and awareness of the needs of females with autism

It is suggested that the needs of females with autism may be unlikely to come to the attention of school staff; partly because autism in females may not manifest in the same way as it would in males (Nichols et al., 2009). Females with autism have better superficial social skills, fewer special interests and less hyperactivity and aggression than males with autism (Gillberg & Coleman, 2000). The 'subtle' presentation of symptoms in females could result in their needs going unidentified and unaddressed in a busy school environment (Attwood, 2007). In a longitudinal study of children aged 7-12 years, May (2013) found that males with high-functioning autism presented with higher levels of hyperactivity and received more school based services than their female counterparts who presented with higher levels of social anxiety. The anxiety of females with autism may not be as visible as the more externalising behaviours of males with autism. This suggests a

requirement for research which highlights these female needs to school staff and provides them with the opportunity to consider how they can be supported most effectively. Due to the fact that this research relied largely on parent reports of symptoms and behaviour it could be that parents were more likely to pick up on and report behaviours that fitted with gender stereotypes. This highlights the value of including multiple perspectives and pupil voice in this area of research. However, the finding that females with autism received fewer school based services re-emphasises the risk of their needs going overlooked.

Gould and Ashton-Smith (2011) identify a necessity for staff to be better trained to recognise and address the needs of females with autism and to provide more 'female orientated' support; particularly around understanding and managing social relationships. Furthermore, a recent study by Dean et al. (2014) suggests that females and males with autism have rather different experiences regarding social groups in the school setting. Through analysing peer nomination data they found that, while male pupils with autism were more likely to be overtly socially excluded, females with autism were more often overlooked, rather than rejected. This could imply that it is easier to detect the social exclusion of males with autism, compared to females with autism. Considering the importance of reciprocal friendship for females (Rose & Rudolph, 2006) and the high risk of internalising symptoms in females with autism, the experience of being left off the social radar could negatively implicate their sense of belonging and mental well-being.

Like many studies into the social experiences of autistic individuals, Dean et al. (2014) did not triangulate the peer nomination data with the perspectives of teachers or parents. The literature suggests a need for more studies into females with autism that consider pupils' views, as well as those of significant individuals who support them (Cridland et al., 2014). This is important in order to gain a more holistic understanding of their experiences and needs. It could also provide insight into the factors that either facilitate or act as barriers to supporting these females.

2.4.3 The role of school staff

Staff have an important role to play in helping pupils with autism develop a sense of belonging to the school community; from supporting the formation of peer relationships to providing individualised support (Pesonen, et al. 2015; Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2001). However, because the needs of females with autism are expressed in such a subtle way it may be that staff are less likely to notice their difficulties around social inclusion and peer acceptance. This is an area that needs more research, as the perspectives of those who support females with autism are currently missing within the majority of the literature.

One of the few studies into females with autism to consider pupil, parent and teacher perspectives focused on females in a primary school setting. Using ethnographic case studies, Moyse and Porter (2015) interviewed female pupils with autism, their mothers, teachers and Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCos). They concluded that school staff were unable to recognise and support challenges around social rules and expectations for these pupils. This is referred to as the hidden curriculum; "that we are not taught directly yet are assumed to know" (Myles & Simpson, 2001, p.279). The study also found large differences in the perspectives of pupils, parents and teachers regarding the difficulties experienced by the females in school. They concluded that teachers often misunderstand autism in females; increasing the likelihood that their needs go unrecognised and unsupported. These findings could have significant implications for the extent to which the pupils were able to establish a sense of belonging in school. However, these findings were based on a sample of just three pupils and suggest a need for further research into the unseen social challenges experienced by females with autism; particularly in the secondary setting. The study also seems to highlight the short-comings of staff knowledge and understanding, without considering how this could be improved, or any areas of good practice. This is important in order to establish how to support these pupils most effectively.

2.5 How the current research addresses gaps in the literature

By exploring the existing research into a sense of belonging and females with autism, this review has highlighted a number of gaps and limitations within the literature. It will now be discussed how the current study aims to address these gaps and limitations and how it will contribute to our understanding of this area.

2.5.1 Lack of research into females with autism

Although knowledge around autism has developed in recent years, there has been limited research on females with this diagnosis. The majority of studies have used samples that are disproportionately male; most likely due to the higher number of males than females identified with autism (Halladay et al., 2015). This has led to an understanding of autism as it typically presents in males (Cridland et al. 2014). This research area has therefore been highlighted as a significant gap in the literature (Nichols et al., 2009); particularly as the number of females being diagnosed with autism is increasing (Lai, et al., 2015). The current research aims to address the need to explore the experiences of adolescent female pupils with autism and add to our knowledge and understanding of this under-researched group.

2.5.2 Exploring sense of belonging for adolescent females with autism

Due to the combination of their condition and their gender, females with autism are a "minority within a minority" (Faherty, 2006, p.10). This raises questions regarding their sense of belonging to the social world. Sense of belonging is a particularly relevant construct for females with autism; especially when considering the two defining attributes of "valued involvement" and "fit", as proposed by Hagerty et al. (1992). Nevertheless, it may be that there are alternative or additional elements that constitute a sense of belonging for adolescent females with autism. Sancho and Cline (2012) explored how pupils experienced a sense of belonging during their transition to secondary school. The authors concluded that whilst the findings provided support for the concept of

"valued involvement" described in the Hagerty et al. model, they did not support the notion of "fit". This may have been associated with the age of the pupils and suggests that there is a need to explore the model further with other populations.

Sense of belonging is proposed to have positive associations with mental health and general well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). There are high rates of social isolation and mental health problems amongst females with autism (Solomon et al., 2012). Exploring the sense of belonging and exclusion experienced by this population could therefore provide important insights into the factors contributing to their well-being. However, the only study so far to explore sense of belonging in females with autism focused on the experiences of two adult women and relied on retrospective accounts (Pesonen et al., 2015). The current study aims to capture the social experiences of females with autism in the current education system, with the view of identifying effective support for these pupils.

2.5.3 A need for methods that explore pupils' lived experiences

To date there has been a small collection of studies suggesting that females with autism have rather different experiences to males with autism in regards to peer relationships, acceptance and rejection (Holtmann et al., 2007; Hsiao et al., 2013; Dean et al., 2014). However, the majority of these studies employed only quantitative methods, thereby preventing further exploration of how the pupils make meaning of these experiences. By using semi-structured interviews, the current research aims to obtain in-depth data and to learn from participants' personal experiences, as advocated by Billington, McNally and McNally (2000).

Furthermore, amongst the few studies that have included qualitative methods, there has been little consideration of how best to support the pupils in communicating their views. While open-ended interview formats may have allowed participants to speak freely about their experiences, unstructured verbal communication can be difficult for pupils with autism. The interview schedule in the current research will be developed using hierarchical focusing, as proposed by Tomlinson (1989). The interview will be led by the participants, within the overarching framework that I have set. Visual prompts have been identified as a

way of supporting autistic individuals to process information and express thoughts and feelings (National Autistic Society, 2013). Nind (2008) also emphasises the importance of practical, visual complements to open-ended approaches when working with individuals with autism. In the current study, pupil interviews will include rating scales, pictures, mind maps and drawing activities to support with understanding and discussion around the abstract concepts concerned, i.e. belonging and exclusion.

2.5.4 A need to explore good practice in supporting females with autism

It is proposed that the understanding of school staff around the needs of females with autism is limited (Moyse & Porter, 2015), yet there are few studies that attempt to address this, or identify good practice. This suggests a need for research which gives more consideration as to how pupil views can inform effective support and provision for females with autism in mainstream school. Furthermore, there is a requirement for studies that seek multiple perspectives on the needs and support for females with autism (Cridland et al., 2014). This is important in order to gain a holistic understanding of their needs and experiences and how to move forward in supporting them. The current research will expand on previous findings by exploring what adolescent females with autism feel benefits their social experiences; and how they experience belonging, as well as exclusion in school. Pupil perspectives will then be further explored in the second phase of the research through interviews with parents and focus groups with school staff. The aim of this phase of the research is to seek their perceptions of the provision needed to address the challenges raised by the pupils. The research seeks to contribute to the limited literature regarding effective support for adolescent females with autism in mainstream school.

2.5.5 Conclusion

The purpose of this literature review was to consider the existing research into females with autism and to clarify the rationale and aims of the current study. It should now be more explicit how the current study will address the gaps and

limitations within the literature and how it will contribute to our knowledge and understanding of adolescent females with autism.

3. Specific Aims and Research Questions

3.1 Phase One

Aims:

- To explore the social experiences of adolescent females with autism in mainstream school

- To explore the views and experiences of adolescent females with autism in regards to their sense of belonging and exclusion in mainstream school

- To explore what adolescent females with autism feel would support them with the social challenges of mainstream school

Research Questions:

1) What do adolescent females with autism feel about their social experiences in mainstream secondary school?
a) In what ways do they feel they belong?
b) In what ways do they feel excluded?

2) What do adolescent females with autism feel would support them socially in mainstream school?

3.2 Phase Two

Aims:

- To explore the views of parents and school staff in regards to the social challenges of mainstream school for adolescent females with autism

- To identify areas of good practice in supporting the social and emotional well-being of adolescent females with autism in mainstream secondary school

- To explore the views of parents and school staff in regards to the support and provision needed to address the challenges identified by adolescent females with autism in mainstream school

Research Questions:

1) What are the social challenges for adolescent females with autism in mainstream school from the perspective of:
   a) Parents
   b) School staff

2) What support and provision is needed to address the challenges identified by adolescent females with autism in mainstream school from the perspective of:
   a) Parents
   b) School staff

4. Methodology and Research Design

4.1 Methodological Orientation

The current research adopted a constructionist paradigm, which assumes that meaning is not discovered, but constructed (Crotty, 1998). Furthermore, humans construct meaning as they engage with the world they are interpreting. Constructionism proposes that our understanding of the world is heavily influenced by social processes and that what we regard as truth is the product of our interactions with other people in society, rather than an objective observation of the world (Burr, 2003). This is particularly relevant to the current research, which considers the experiences of females who are considered a "minority within a minority" by society (Faherty, 2006, p.10). Gergen (1994, pp. 49-50) suggests that "The terms and forms by which we achieve understanding of the world and ourselves are social artefacts, products of historically and culturally situated interchanges among people." This research explores, on a small scale, how our societal understanding of autism and femininity impacts on the experiences and self-perceptions of adolescent females with autism. It also explores their construct of belonging and the extent to which they feel a sense of belonging and exclusion within the school environment.

The constructionist methodology assumes that reality is socially constructed (Flick, 2006). Therefore, the ontological position adopted in this research was relativist. This approach assumes that reality is represented through the eyes of participants and cannot exist independently from an individual's theoretical beliefs (Robson, 2002). Willig (2013) identifies language as an important aspect of socially constructed knowledge; and that differing descriptions of the same phenomenon or event can give rise to different understandings; none of which are necessarily wrong. Willig asserts that there are 'knowledges', as opposed to a single knowledge. Therefore, the task of the researcher is to seek and understand multiple constructions of meaning and knowledge in relation to the topic of interest. This requires methods that allow for the exploration of multiple perspectives. The current research therefore obtained the perspectives of pupils, parents and school staff to explore the way in which females with autism are viewed by themselves and by others.

The constructionist approach also stresses the active role of the researcher in the development of knowledge, as their experience and beliefs will inevitably contribute to their interpretation of the data. In this sense, it is "… impossible to separate the inquirer from the inquired into" (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p.88). It is therefore important for the researcher to acknowledge their individual beliefs, values and experiences that can contribute to the formulation of knowledge; and to avoid "…treating their accounts as concrete realities or material truths" (Jacobs & Manzi, 2000, p.36).

I am a woman in my mid-twenties from the South West of England. Prior to beginning my doctorate in educational psychology I had experience of supporting male and female pupils with autism in a mainstream secondary school and in a special school setting. I noticed the differences in how autism presents in males and females and the distinct challenges for the females and their families. In my role as a Learning Mentor, I frequently liaised with the parents of pupils with autism and supported at a course for parents of children with autism. I also attended an influential conference on females with autism, where I had the chance to listen to the life experiences of women with autism. These experiences have contributed to my keen interest in this topic and my approach to the research. Throughout this study I was acutely aware of the need to be as reflexive as possible, as advocated by Ahern (1999). Whilst carrying out this research I was very conscious of the potential for my beliefs and experiences to influence the findings. I therefore made a particular effort to make questions as open as possible and to refrain from leading the participants' responses. I also ensured that I remained open to the emergence of unexpected themes during the analysis of the data, so as not to pre-empt the findings.

4.2 Research design

The constructionist position informs a qualitative approach to research. This seemed appropriate for the current study, given Elliott, Fischer and Rennie's (1999) suggestion that qualitative methods can be used to "understand and

represent the experiences and actions of people as they encounter, engage and live through situations" (p.216).

4.2.1 Phase One Design

The first phase of the research explored the views and experiences of adolescent females with autism in regards to the ways in which they feel they belong and the ways in which they feel excluded in school. Semi-structured interviews were employed in phase one to obtain the perspectives of adolescent females with autism. Lawthom and Tindall (2011) suggest that the semi-structured interview can be used to generate first person accounts of individual experiences. This is important in the current research, given that the purpose is to gain insight into the views and experiences of females with autism and those who support them.

The interview schedule was developed using hierarchical focusing, as proposed by Tomlinson (1989); and consisted of open questions, explored through clarification and prompting. This flexible approach allows the respondents to lead the discussion to a certain degree, providing more of an insight into their perception of the world. The questions explored how pupils experience a sense of belonging and exclusion in school and were based on the two dimensions of belonging proposed by Hagerty et al. (1992); "valued involvement" and 'fitting in'. An exploratory approach was adopted to investigate the extent to which the social experiences of adolescent females with autism support this model of the concept.

To accompany verbal questions, pupils were presented with a range of activities with a visual element. This was to enable the pupils to feel at ease during 1:1 social interaction, to prompt ideas and to support discussion around abstract concepts such as belonging and exclusion. Verbal communication can be difficult for pupils with autism and visual prompts have been identified as a way of supporting their ability to process information and express thoughts and feelings (National Autistic Society, 2013). The activities included mind maps, drawing, rating scales and discussion of pictures relating to their social experiences. I saw this approach as most appropriate in order to gain insight into the lived

experiences of the pupils; and in line with the proposal of Fransella and Dalton (1990) that "understanding lies in our ability to see events through the eyes of another" (p.16).

The pupil interviews were analysed using thematic analysis in order to gain a rich and detailed account of the data. This followed a series of planned stages as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Thematic analysis was chosen as it is a flexible approach which is not tied to particular theoretical assumptions. It can also provide a detailed account of the data, which was important in order to capture the individual experiences of the participants; and the emergence of common themes across the data. The flexibility of the method also allowed for the analysis of data which was collected using a variety of approaches including draw and talk activities and picture based discussions.

It could be argued that the flexibility of thematic analysis also acts as a disadvantage, as it means that a wide range of conclusions could be drawn from the data. Additionally, it could be difficult for the researcher to decide which aspects of the data to focus on. The research questions in the current study were therefore made open enough to allow for themes to emerge inductively, whilst providing a general, overarching focus.

Due to the risk of the researcher's beliefs and values influencing the interpretation of the data, it was important to avoid making presumptions about the themes that would emerge. At the same time, one of the criticisms of qualitative data is that 'anything goes' (Antaki, Billig, Edwards & Potter, 2002). Whilst qualitative approaches may not be subjected to the same criteria as quantitative approaches, Braun and Clarke (2006) provide a method of analysis that involves a rigorous process of data familiarisation, data coding and theme development and revision. This approach was therefore considered appropriate to explore my research questions and to provide a rich description of the participants' views and experiences.

The themes generated from the pupil interviews were used as a basis for developing interview materials to gather parent and school staff views in phase two of the research.

4.2.2 Phase Two Design

The second phase of the research sought the views of the parents and school staff who support adolescent females with autism. It explored what they perceive to be the social challenges for these pupils within the school environment. It also explored what support and provision parents and school staff felt was needed to address the concerns and challenges identified by the pupils in phase one. Parent views were gained on an individual basis, through semi-structured interviews to allow them to share in depth their personal experiences and their thoughts regarding school provision and support for their daughter.

Focus groups were used to gather the views of school staff. This method enables the construction of knowledge through group interaction (Robson, 2002) and seemed appropriate to capture the views and opinions of individuals who work together daily within a staff team. The focus group method provided a way of studying how staff members collectively understand the social challenges of adolescent females with autism; reflecting the process through which meaning is constructed in everyday life (Bryman 2012). Focus groups also allow the researcher to observe a large amount of interaction on a particular topic and can elicit a wide variety of views within the group. This was deemed useful as it provided the opportunity to explore the similarity or divergence of individual views on the topic.

The semi-structured interview and focus group questions were adapted from the pupil interview schedule in phase one. Parents and staff were also presented with the themes that emerged from the pupil interviews, with quotes to illustrate the ways in which the pupils feel a sense of belonging and exclusion in school. This was used to prompt discussion around the support and provision needed to address the social challenges identified by the pupils.

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to analyse the semi-structured interviews and focus groups to identify themes that emerged from parent and staff responses. Further details of the analysis are provided in the relevant sections of this thesis.

5. Phase One Methods

5.1 Participants

Participants were selected purposively, with the following inclusion criteria:

- Female, aged 11-18 years old, with a formal diagnosis of autism or Asperger syndrome that they are aware of.

- Attending mainstream secondary or middle school.

- Able to express themselves verbally.

To begin the process of participant recruitment I liaised with colleagues in the Educational Psychology Service (EPS) and a specialist autism advisory teacher about mainstream schools attended by adolescent female pupils with autism. In February 2016 I contacted SENCos in secondary and middle schools in the south west of England by email, providing a written explanation of the research. Seven SENCos were contacted and four agreed for their school to take part and to pass on details of the research to female pupils with autism and their parents.

To inform pupils of the purpose of the research I created pupil friendly information sheets, using Mencap's guidelines for accessible writing (2002) (see Appendix 3). In March 2016 these were sent by school SENCos to pupils' homes, along with a parent/guardian information sheet and consent form. Signed pupil and parent consent forms were returned to the school and passed back to me via SENCos.

Ten pupils were invited to participate in the research and eight agreed to take part. Participants were from three mainstream schools and were aged between 12-17 years old. The details of the three schools attended by the participants are as follows:

- School 1: Mainstream secondary school for girls
- School 2: Mainstream mixed secondary school
- School 3: Mainstream mixed middle school with an on-site autism base

The following table displays further details of the phase one participants.

Pseudonym	**Age**	**Diagnosis**	**Age at Diagnosis**	**School**	**Education, Health and Care Plan**
Ella	12	Asperger Syndrome	12	School 1	No
Zara	14	Autistic Spectrum Disorder	11	School 1	Yes
Jasmine	13	Autistic Spectrum Disorder	10	School 1	No
Scarlett	15	Asperger Syndrome	15	School 2	No
Saffy	13	Autistic Spectrum Disorder	10	School 2	No
Sophia	17	Asperger Syndrome	15	School 2	No
Darcy	12	Autistic Spectrum Disorder	9	School 3	Yes
Charlie	12	Autistic Spectrum Disorder	6	School 3	Yes

Table 1. Phase one participant details

5.2 Semi-structured interviews

Phase one of the research aimed to explore the social experiences of adolescent females with autism in mainstream school. Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain the individual views and experiences of females with autism in regards to belonging and exclusion within school. This method has been used effectively in other studies which seek the views of young people with autism (Cridland et al., 2014; Tierney et al., 2016).

Hierarchical focusing, as proposed by Tomlinson (1989), was used to develop the interview schedule. This allowed for the discussion to be led by participants, with prompts employed when a topic had not been raised. Questions explored how participants experience belonging and exclusion and were based on themes identified in the literature, as well as the dimensions of belonging proposed by Hagerty et al. (1992). The broad themes explored by the questions were as follows:

- Importance and understanding of belonging

- Views and experiences around "fitting in"
  - Identification with others
  - Barriers and support around "fitting in"

- Views and experiences around "valued involvement"
  - Nature of peer relationships
  - Social acceptance, exclusion and bullying
  - Relationships and support from school staff

See Appendix 1 for more details on the process of constructing the phase one interview schedule.

To facilitate discussion and to support participants in communicating their thoughts and ideas, the following activities were included as part of the semi-structured interview:

- Discussion of the 'Blob Playground' picture, taken from 'The Big Book of Blobs' (Wilson & Long, 2008): Participants were asked which figures look like they belong/ do not belong and which is most similar to them.

- 'Circles of belonging' activity: This was created by me, the researcher, and consisted of concentric circles. The most inner circle represented the highest degree of belonging and the most outer circle represented the

lowest degree of belonging. Participants marked where they would position themselves and others within the circles of belonging.

- Mind-mapping: This was used as a basis to discuss how participants perceived others as similar and different to them.

- Social challenges images: A collection of images depicting various social scenes to facilitate discussion around social challenges within school.

- Sociogram: This method has been used in other research with adolescent females with autism (Tierney et al., 2016). Participants drew a circle representing themselves and represented their friends by drawing triangles. The distance to the circle represented the closeness of each friend.

- 'You in groups' activity, taken from 'Draw on Your Emotions' (Sunderland & Engleheart, 1997): This was used to facilitate discussion around social exclusion.

- 'Feelings of belonging' sheet. This was created by me, the researcher, and required participants to reflect on their feelings of belonging during certain times in the school day, using pictures and rating scales. Participants completed these sheets in their own time following our first interview and we discussed their responses during the second interview.

See Appendix 2 for more information on phase one interview materials.

All activities were used as a basis for discussion and were not analysed separately from the verbal responses provided for the semi-structured interviews.

5.3 Piloting

Prior to data collection, the semi-structured interview was piloted with one 13 year old female pupil with Asperger syndrome, who attended a mixed mainstream

secondary school. Piloting is important in order to check the feasibility of the method and overcome any issues (Robson, 2002).

Minor amendments were made to the interview schedule following the pilot. This involved changing the wording of one question to make it clearer and adding some supplementary questions to help pupils to consider additional support that could be provided in school. Additional piloting was not possible due to the limited participants available.

Further details of the amendments to the interview schedule are included in Appendix 1.

5.4 Procedure

All pupils were given the option of being interviewed at school or at home. Seven participants chose to be interviewed at school and one at home. Interviews took place in a quiet room that was familiar to the participants. Participants also had the option of having a parent or staff member to accompany them during the interview, but none of them requested this.

Prior to meeting the participants, I provided each of them with a letter explaining the date, time and place in school we would be meeting (if this was the chosen option). The letter also gave a reminder of the purpose of the research and details of the interview and activities involved.

I interviewed participants on two occasions, which was important in order to build rapport and trust with them. Each session lasted between 30-45 minutes and there was approximately a one week gap between the first and second interview. One pupil chose to be interviewed on one occasion only. At the end of the first interview I introduced the 'feelings of belonging' sheet and asked participants to complete at least one of these before our next interview. These sheets required participants to reflect on the extent to which they felt a sense of belonging at particular times during the school day. Participants discussed their responses for

this activity during the second interview. The participant who chose not to be interviewed a second time returned her completed sheets via her parent.

All interviews were recorded using a Dictaphone and transcribed using Microsoft Word.

5.5 Analysis

Semi-structured interviews in phase one were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) in order to gain a rich and detailed account of the data. This form of analysis was chosen as it is theoretically flexible and can be used to examine the way in which people construct and understand experiences, events and meaning (Braun & Clarke 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2013). The thematic analysis followed a series of six stages:

1) Transcription and repeated reading of transcripts to increase familiarity
2) Generating initial codes and mapping out initial themes
3) Repeated examination of the data to ascertain emerging themes
4) Review and refinement of themes
5) Finalising and naming themes
6) Reporting the findings

Table 2. Stages of thematic analysis

Data from the semi-structured interviews was analysed both inductively and deductively. Initial coding of the data was based on the research questions and therefore deductive. Further codes and themes arose from the data corresponding to the research questions, which was therefore inductive.

The data was coded in Microsoft Word, using the 'track changes' function to name and comment on selections of text. Thematic maps were developed and reviewed to produce the final themes.

To increase the credibility of the findings, the transcripts were read by three colleagues who had a good understanding of the focus of the research and who expressed agreement regarding the codes and themes generated from the thematic analysis.

The table below displays an example of the process by which the data was analysed, including the coding of the data, the emerging themes, the review and refinement of themes and final themes and sub-themes. Please see Appendix 4 for more details on the stages of thematic analysis

Quotation	**Initial coding**	**Emerging themes**	**Review and refinement of themes**	**Final theme and sub-themes**
Scarlett: "Yeah. And I said that I was autistic to people and they were like 'No you're not, because my brother's autistic and such and such. And you don't act like my brother such and such'. And it's like, that kind of made me feel irrelevant."	Felt irrelevant when others doubted her autism	Others' acceptance and understanding of autism	**Awareness and understanding of autism** - A need to be understood	**Limited awareness and understanding of autism**
Researcher: What would help you to get from here to here? (Current to desired position on circle of belonging) **Zara:** "If people understood my autism a little bit more and maybe just what might cause me to go. Everyone keeps asking me and keeps getting me into trouble and keeps asking me the same question all the time and stuff…" "Most staff understand me, but I feel that some students actually don't understand what it (autism) is."	Desire for peers to understand her autism more			

Table 3. Example to show thematic analysis process

5.6 Ethics

Prior to data collection, ethical approval was received from the Graduate School of Education's ethics committee (see Appendix 3).

In accordance with the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (2010) guidance on "working with vulnerable populations" (p.31) it was important to maximise the understanding and ability of pupils to give informed consent. I created information sheets for the pupils, using Mencap's guidelines for accessible writing (2002); explaining the purpose of the study and what their participation would involve if they agreed to take part.

Prior to beginning each interview I re-explained to pupils the content of the information sheet. I checked that they understood what their involvement would consist of, that their responses would be confidential and anonymous and that they had the right to withdraw at any time. Following Nind's (2008) recommendations around informed consent, I looked for positive indicators of consent including: a high level of engagement (eye contact, body language), relevant elaboration (verbal comments) and positive non-verbal responses (nodding). I repeated explanations and gave time for the pupils to process this information. I also introduced a traffic light system to give pupils an alternative way of communicating their level of understanding, comfort and agreement: green= I am happy to continue; orange= I am not sure; red=I am not happy/ I want to stop.

Written consent was obtained by each of the pupils and their parents, who also received an information sheet explaining what their daughter's participation would involve. Following the interviews, each pupil received a letter thanking them for their participation, summarising the themes that had emerged and inviting them to comment or ask questions if they wished.

Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by giving participants and schools pseudonyms. A system to link the participants' real names with their pseudonyms was created and was accessible only to me, the researcher. Care was taken to ensure that transcriptions did not feature details that could potentially identify participants or schools

6. Phase One Findings

This section details the findings from the semi-structured interviews with adolescent females with autism.

Thematic analysis generated key themes corresponding to the research questions for phase one of the study. For each research question, a summary of the relating themes and sub-themes is presented, followed by relevant quotes taken from the interview transcripts.

6.1 Research Question 1: What do adolescent females with autism feel about their social experiences in mainstream secondary school?

6.1.1 Research Question 1a: In what ways do they feel they belong?

Themes	Sub-themes
Reciprocal friendships	Important qualities of friendship
	Makes school a happier place
Feeling safe and supported	
Encouragement and inclusion	
Opportunities to 'talk it through'	
Feeling understood	Shared interests and values
Establishing and adhering to social expectations	

Table 4. Final themes and sub-themes for phase one research question 1a

Reciprocal friendships

Participants saw friendship as an important basis for belonging and as beneficial for their school experience. The important qualities of a close, reciprocal

friendship were discussed and participants suggested that their overall happiness in school was largely impacted by having a friendship.

Participants identified particular qualities that set apart the people they would consider their friends. Scarlett emphasised the importance of feeling comfortable and tended to place less importance on verbal interaction.

Scarlett: *Like you know when you're with someone and you're comfortable with them, so when it's quiet it's not weird.*

Kindness and understanding were also mentioned as benefits gained through friendship, which increased participants' sense of belonging.

Jasmine: *They'd act really kind and want to be near me.*

Zara described close friends, who knew her well and who were accepting of her autism. She compared them to other peers in school, who did not tolerate her difficulties and support her in the same way.

Zara: *…true friends… they actually understand and just don't not like me for my autism.*

The participants' responses suggested that they saw friendship as having a significant influence on their psychological well-being. Belonging and friendship were suggested to make school a more enjoyable and happier place.

Ella: *I think I'm more similar to the one's that belong.*
Researcher: *How come?*
Ella: *Because I have quite a few friends. And I'm….most of the time happy.*

The companionship that came with having one key friend was seen as particularly important. Some participants reported generally happy experiences of school, which were enhanced by time spent with a close friend. Jasmine described the experience of her best friend joining her in secondary school, after a year apart from her.

Jasmine: *She makes it happy. Cos year 7… I loved year 7 so much but the only bad thing was she wasn't there. That was the only bad thing I had.*

Meanwhile, other participants had more negative feelings about school, but described the impact that their friendships had on their motivation to attend.

Scarlett: *… I mean there were times where I'd only go into school because I wanted to see my friends.*

Feeling safe and supported

Pupils spoke about the social security that comes through peer relationships. For some, close physical proximity to friends was important to enable them to feel confident in a large secondary school environment.

Ella: *Like you sort of have to have friends so you can go around with them and if you don't have friends there's nowhere really to go.*

Pupils also shared experiences where peers had stood up for them when others were being unkind. Jasmine described an incident when her friend had stepped in to support her during a difficult social situation.

Jasmine: *Yeah cos like once someone wasn't being nice and she was like 'calm down she's my friend'…*

In addition to the safety provided by peer relationships, participants also discussed the importance of safety and support provided by aspects of the school environment. Pupils discussed particular areas in school where they feel safe and are able to check in with staff or peers. For Ella, this was a lunchtime club, where she felt comfortable and welcome.

Ella: *It's just a place to go like away from every body and people from student support run it. …So we sit there as a place to go and they chat about like how's your week's going and that's been a nice thing to do.*

Small, quiet areas were seen as important to the pupils, as they offer relief from the busy social environment of the school. Saffy explained that she felt confident playing with and talking to others at the student support centre. This area provided a safe base, where she could meet her friends during unstructured times of the day.

Saffy: *I always play here. Cos it's a safe place for me…There's different rooms, so you can go in and speak to someone.*

Encouragement and inclusion

Participants emphasised social inclusion as a key aspect of belonging, giving examples of instances where their peers had acknowledged them and made them feel valued.

Sophia: *It's like wanting to be there and feeling that people want you to be there…*
I guess it's just nice to have people to talk to and sort of like realise you're there and… kind of interact with.

Jasmine: *Like every time she sees me, even though she's talking she'll turn and say hi to me.*

Friends were also suggested to encourage participation, therefore making school experiences more fun and interesting.

Saffy: *She goes 'Oh friends aren't important. I don't need them'. I'm like 'Yeah they are important'. Cos you can do things with them and it's not just you and nothing. You would be just sat there bored. Then you'll wish that you had friends.*

Zara: *…if when they've got friends that's joining in, they might say 'Oh come on and join in'.*

Whilst inclusion and time with others was considered important and desirable, participants also commented on their need for time away from busy social settings. Being part of a larger group was not always considered as important as acknowledgement and time with an individual or small friendship group.

Darcy: *Like sometimes I'm happy to get away from everyone. But other times, I kind of want to be with everyone…*

Charlie: *But I don't really like want more friends.*
Researcher: *How come?*
Charlie: *I just enjoy having one friend…or two. Because if that person is ill, I can just … talk to them.*

Opportunities to 'talk it through'

Pupils placed high importance on having opportunities to talk through their problems and worries. Sophia recognised the benefits of the guidance and containment that could come from conversations with friends.

Sophia: *… if it was something that was bothering you sort of like, you would maybe talk it though a bit. And sort of like depending on what it was, they might be able to help.*

Darcy also commented on the importance of having opportunities to share with and confide in friends.

Researcher: *How important is it for you to have friends?*
Darcy: *Quite important if you want to talk to somebody, or tell them something.*

In addition, key adults in school were also mentioned as being helpful in regards to listening and talking through social problems. Zara discussed her mentoring

sessions with a member of staff who enabled her to discuss and reflect on difficult social situations.

Zara: *My mentor…She talks to me and finds ways to… how to help me.*

Feeling understood

Participants discussed particular individuals who they felt understood them and truly knew them. It was suggested that teachers had an impact on the extent to which pupils felt understood and comfortable within the classroom setting. Establishing a trusting relationship with teachers over time was also seen as important.

Sophia: *...some teachers … are more understanding than others.*
Researcher: *Tell me more about that. How do they show that they understand a bit better?*
Sophia: *It's the kind of… like I have… you feel that they know you and they kind of, sort of know what sort of person you are.*

Sophia: *… I used to really not get on with this teacher, but then they kind of realised kind of that after a bit… that you kind of trust slash respect each other.*

Participants also discussed the importance of having a teacher who understood how to support them effectively in class. There was a preference for teachers who recognised the need to provide processing time as well as clear, simple instructions.

Saffy: *Cos she doesn't moan at me, she doesn't boss me around. She doesn't go 'Oh Saffy, do that'. Cos she'll go 'Saffy have you got this done?' and I'll say 'No' and she'll leave it on the board for me.*

These teachers were compared to those who demonstrated more limited patience and mistook processing difficulties for poor attention.

Saffy: *They don't give me time. They'll go 'Oh, no time's up'. It's like oh my god! So it's like half of them, they'll have a go at me at why it's not filled and I'll say 'Because you didn't give us enough time'.*

Ella: *I didn't take in the instructions for how to use the sewing machine, so I just went along with it…she (teacher) stood there and went through the instructions, like really angrily with me and it wasn't my fault- really annoying.*

Participants also discussed the advantages of having friends who could empathise with their difficulties and the challenging aspects of school.

Ella: *…we're quite similar cos she has anxiety as well. And she gets quite stressed as well so we talk about that.*

Zara: *…they understand when I'm upset and understand when I've got things going on.*

The pupils who had a friend with autism commented on the way in which they were able relate to each other. Having someone who understood what it was like to have this diagnosis was suggested to be important.

Researcher: *And how come you like spending time with Darcy?*
Charlie: *Because she knows how it feels to be autistic…*

In addition, pupils talked about peers with whom they had established common interests and like mindedness. For some, this seemed to provide a sense of identification and for others, it gave them a basis to initiate interaction and guide conversation.

Charlie: *We laugh about a lot of stuff… the same things. We find anything funny. We have the same interests…*

…Yeah like (laughs) me and Darcy are really weird people… Unique! Our favourite colour's black (laughs). That's really weird… and everyone else's is like pink.

Sophia: *…we like similar music and stuff and we were sort of talking a bit about that as well, which is quite nice.*

Some of the pupils discussed friendships that they had developed online, with other young people who shared their interest. Saffy discussed her interest in dolls and the online "community" she had discovered, where she could express this interest.

Researcher: *So what sort of things do you make videos about on you-tube?*

Saffy: *Dolls. Cos it's a you-tube like… everyone… they have a community. I do them with my… it's not a club, but as my friend started… she said 'You should start as well', so she got me in to it.*

Establishing and adhering to social expectations

When describing the profile of an individual who would experience a sense of belonging in school, pupils often identified qualities that were in line with social norms, particularly in regards to female behaviour. These tended to include references to verbal interaction skills, confidence and kindness.

Researcher: S*o can you tell me what sort of person you think might be inside the circle of belonging?*
Ella: *Someone who's confident and has quite a fun, bubbly personality and is chatty.*
If you don't act nice to them then they won't act nice to you.

Pupils also explained the social benefits of behaving in a way that pleases others and being able to adapt their behaviour to ensure positive interactions with peers. For Ella, this involved mirroring the behaviour of her peers to feel confident that she was adhering to the social expectations of the group.

Ella: *I do whatever they're doing…*

…*Yeah it helps because then it's doing the sort of thing that they like. Then you'll know that they'll like what you're doing.*

Meanwhile, Sophia commented on the skill of adapting one's behaviour depending on the situation and the impact that this can have on social acceptance.

Researcher: *What would you say are the defining features of someone who fits in? What would we see?*
Sophia: *Well they're kind of like more adaptable to kind of like… they're not necessarily the same, but they can sort of adapt their, like, behaviour enough to sort of get along with people.*

6.1.2 Research Question 1b: In what ways do they feel excluded?

Themes	**Sub-themes**
Being on the periphery	On the periphery during group interactions
	On the periphery within the classroom
Feeling de- valued	Not being listened to
	Underestimated by others
	Possessing unfavourable attributes
Limited awareness and understanding of autism	
Desire for identification with others	Being the odd one out
	Different to other females with autism
Stigma surrounding difference and difficulty	Identification of autism can lead to stigma
Social skills	Working out social rules
	Managing complex social dynamics

Table 5. Final themes and sub-themes for phase one research question 1b

Being on the periphery

Participants described experiences where they did not feel part of a social group. This occurred more regularly for some than others. Sophia made particular reference to feeling ignored during group interactions.

Sophia: *Well I'm just usually kind of like on the outside and I can step away and no one notices.*

Zara spoke about instances where she had been more overtly excluded or left out.

Zara: *And I join in their conversation and they just look at me and say 'Why are you joining in? You don't need to.'*

Others explained that there had been instances where they felt unable to join in with the conversation and activities of the group. Charlie discussed her past experience of being part of a friendship group with whom she could not relate to; and who had very different interests and priorities to her.

Charlie: *When I was in a group of girls, they used to like talk about stuff all the time and make fun of like people… at break times they used to go to the toilets all the time and do their hair and make-up… And they could all do gymnastics… I used to have to just stand there and watch them.*

Participants discussed instances where they felt they were on the periphery within the classroom, as well as during unstructured group interactions. They shared examples of lessons where they found it difficult to access the learning material. Ella emphasised the difficulty of processing the teacher's spoken instructions. Often, she did not feel comfortable asking for help.

Ella: *…when I don't know what they're talking about (teachers), like I can't take it in, it's really annoying and I have no clue what they're saying. It's like they're talking another language and um it's like really annoying cos then I don't know what to do…*
…I keep it to myself when I find something difficult.

For Scarlett, the combination of this and falling out with another pupil deterred her from attending the lesson.

Scarlett: *I didn't want to go to science cos I didn't want to see him. I didn't feel like it was my… place there.*

…I didn't like science anyway, because it was hard… it was a hard subject at that time. So I kind of… stopped going to that lesson eventually… I didn't ask the teacher to move me because I didn't want to cause a hassle either.

Some pupils also reported difficulties in regards to group work during lessons, as peers would often not want to work with them.

Saffy: *…one time in music like I felt really lonely cos no one would let me in the group with them… and I really wanted to go with people.*

Feeling de- valued

Participants made reference to social situations where they did not feel listened to, or their contribution was not valued by others.

Scarlett: *If I was in the conversation at all I was always like… we always talked about what they wanted to talk about… sometimes I wasn't listened to at all…*

Ella: *I just sat in the corner for the rest of the time cos I just felt… like left out. No one was listening to my ideas.*

Some were conscious of others underestimating them and treating them as they would a younger child. Participants discussed the way in which staff spoke to them when they found out they had a diagnosis of autism and suggested that this could often lead to differential treatment.

Darcy: *When I first got diagnosed everyone started treating me differently … I got treated differently, like babyish.*

Darcy: *I think everyone thinks that we're stupid, but we're not.*

Charlie: *They just talk to us weirdly… Like we're babies... And they sometimes look at us really weird.*

Pupils suggested that they possessed attributes perceived as unfavourable by others. Scarlett expressed concerns that she could easily irritate or offend her peers. She tended to see the sensitivity of others being as the main cause of this.

Scarlett: *I feel like it irritates people, like I irritate people.*
It's a bit difficult. Especially when you have like sensitive people and they get like really offended really quickly. When I'm trying to make a light-hearted joke, but it sounds to them like 'Oh my god!...'

Meanwhile, Ella reported that she felt some teachers disliked her because of their perception that she does not listen. For Ella, this seemed to demonstrate the teachers' misunderstanding of her needs.

Researcher: *And do the teachers like you generally do you think?*
Ella: *Some of them… and then some of them absolutely hate me… They hate me because they don't think I listen but I do.*

Limited awareness and understanding of autism

Participants felt that the people around them in the school environment had a limited understanding of their autism and how this can affect their learning and behaviour.

Zara: *…they don't like to be with me cos they don't understand how to cope with my autism.*

Researcher: *What about the teachers, do you feel like they understand you?*
Ella: *No not really. I don't think they know that I have autism either… when I don't know what they're talking about, like I can't take it in, it's really annoying and I have no clue what they're saying…and if I ask the teachers they won't understand, they'll just probably shout at me.*

Some pupils suggested that increasing the level of staff and peer understanding, in regards to their areas of difficulty, could improve their school experience.

Sophia: *I guess it might be useful if they knew what… a bit more about what was helpful or not.*

Desire for identification with others

In discussing their similarities and differences to others, some participants compared themselves to other females with autism. It was suggested that many other females with autism had a higher level of need compared to them in regards to their intellectual and social abilities.

Charlie: *… I've always wanted to find someone like who… a girl who's autistic and like, but not like really bad…*

As a result it was suggested to be difficult to fit in and identify with others.

Zara*:* *I don't feel I fit in with anyone as I have autism…*

…It's hard when I'm always the odd one out.

Scarlett: *… I don't know why I'm more alternative, but it's kind of all I've ever felt.*

Darcy expressed concerns that others expected her to behave like most other young people with autism. She therefore attempted to hide her autism to come across as more similar to the majority of her peers.

Darcy: *I try not to let my autistic side of me show, but I guess it's not… I'm kind of happy that it's not like as bad as most people's…*

Stigma surrounding difference and difficulty

Participants suggested that when others were aware of their diagnosis, this was likely to impact the way they behaved towards them. Ella explained that her friends were unaware of her diagnosis and she expressed concerns about how they might react to this information.

Researcher: *You mentioned that your friends don't know about your Aspergers. What do you think they would feel about it if they did know?*
Ella: *I think they would maybe think of me in a different way because it's a name and I think … they'd think of me differently. Cos like I dunno… they just would I think. Yeah it would be weird.*

The pupils suggested that their autism made them "different" and "weird". Furthermore, some commented on the limited extent to which their peers accepted or understood difference.

Scarlett:*… difference is weird, regardless of what different is. If it's not like them, it's not normal. And if it's not normal, it's not ok…*
…And that's also why I was bullied a bit at school, because I wasn't normal. I wasn't the same as everyone else.

Similarly, Darcy expressed concerns that her ability set her apart from her peers and that support and differentiation drew unwanted attention. Like many of the pupils, she described her efforts to make her difficulties go unnoticed and to avoid asking for help. The label of 'special needs' was also spoken about in a way that suggested that there was an element of stigma attached.

Darcy: *I feel really upset and different when we get like different work compared to the others. Cos I know that there's something wrong with the way I work and it makes me feel a bit like… different compared to the other children.*

…what they would think of me if they find out I have a special need problem?

Social skills

Participants discussed their nerves preceding social interactions with peers; often associated with what to say and how to behave. Scarlett expressed fears of awkwardness and rejection due to what she felt were limited social skills. In some instances, this had led to her calling off or avoiding social arrangements outside school.

Scarlett*:* *Because of my lack of social skills it gets pretty awkward pretty quickly…*

Sophia explained that she had needed to educate herself about hidden social rules when she began secondary school. She also mentioned that she had not received adequate support in this area during primary school, which may have made the process of transition more challenging.

Sophia: *… I still wasn't entirely sure of like what to do in social situations all the time… So I did quite a lot of working it out and sort of… and it took like a while.*

Participants also discussed their experiences of managing complex social dynamics within groups of friends. Many expressed a preference for having one key friend, or a small peer group, as opposed to being part of a large social network.

Scarlett: *I was actually pretty content, but at the same time… lonely. Like, I wanted friends that I could talk to, like a group… like a small group. Cos this was a big group, everyone was always moving about. It was hard to keep a small group together before they broke up and went off to speak to individuals.*

Scarlett also discussed the structured, yet socially complex nature of the peer group she spent time with; and how it could be difficult to establish her place within this.

Scarlett: *So like you have the nerds and the goths and the scene kids and all the alternative people chucked in to one and sometimes um like people from the popular groups integrate in…*
… It was a nice little network, but um… it was hard to kind of figure out where you were.

Furthermore, Charlie explained the benefits of having just one friend, as opposed to a peer group. Based on her experience, she suggested that being in a group of female peers involved more arguments and social problem solving. Having one friend was perceived as more manageable.

Charlie: *Well I don't really have as much arguments as I had… when I had lots of friends. And it's easier because like… if someone goes to somebody's house and then they think they're more friends with them…*

6.1.3 Research Question 2: What do adolescent females with autism feel would support them socially in mainstream school?

Themes
Safe social spaces
Creating social opportunities
Increase autism awareness throughout school
Resources to support social skills and well-being

Table 6. Final themes for phase one research question 2

Safe social spaces

Participants spoke positively of the quiet, safe social spaces that existed within their schools. Ella emphasised the importance of more safe social spaces to support with unstructured times of the school day and to help her find her friends easily.

Ella: *We don't have a tutor room. Everyone else does, but we're in the science labs. It would be easier if we had that, cos then you'd know where everyone else would be.*

Creating social opportunities

Pupils suggested that staff could create more opportunities for them to work with and interact socially with others. Sophia implied that it may be easier to interact socially when there is a task or joint activity to be done; providing talking points, structure, a clear beginning and end to the interaction.

Sophia: *…you can't like push people together and sort of make them be friends. I guess if you can set up more opportunities for people to be able to do that, but… if they notice that a couple of people are getting on really well…like not so well it*

disrupts lessons, but if like, then keeping them together in the seating plan instead of changing it, like moving it around a bit.

Saffy discussed the social skills sessions she accessed through outreach provision. She recognised that working with pupils from other schools had helped her form friendships and suggested that a similar approach could be taken by her teachers in school.

Saffy: *… everyone just goes in their normal like groups and that's silly to do. … They could like… try sitting everyone next to someone they've never sat with before. And then they could start talking to each other.*

Increase autism awareness throughout school

Participants suggested various ways to increase understanding and acceptance of autism throughout their school. Scarlett suggested that adult speakers with autism could change pupil perceptions of the condition.

Scarlett: *Um, maybe getting autistic people, like adult autistic people in to talk about autism with kids might help…*

… That might also help the confidence of those with autism.

Zara explained that the school SENCo had given her tutor group a presentation on autism. She felt that this had been an effective way of increasing peer awareness and should be used again.

Zara: *Get the power point and giving it to them again… showing it to them again. For them to understand that actually… they need to calm down… and not react when I'm just looking into space.*

Resources to support social skills and well-being

Pupils suggested a need for more support to be able to understand and manage the social aspects of school. Sophia discussed her strategy of reading spin off books on the internet, which provided her with a social commentary and developed her understanding of social codes and expectations within school.

Sophia: *Just the kind of like… kind of… how to talk to people and what people are kind of expecting from you and kind of like… the sorts of things about like fashion and stuff and how even though it's stupid, that the way people can dress and stuff can affect people's opinions of you and stuff.*

Ella spoke about why she felt it might be helpful to learn more about the strategies used by other females with autism to support them in social situations.

Ella: *I'd like to know their strategies…things and how they've done stuff. Like how they've calmed down and stuff like that when doing stuff… strategies cos like I've got ways to solve things and… I'm sure they have as well.*

Meanwhile, Scarlett spoke about the importance of basing social skills materials on the views and real life experiences of adolescents. She expressed concerns that there are so many different cliques and styles that it would be hard to capture the social norms of them all.

Scarlett: *Crash courses in how to make friends. I feel like that could back-fire, because I feel like people… the people who would design those courses would be like adults right? (…) You'd need like twenty, thirty, forty students having their own input from different groups and cliques. And there are so many groups and cliques. Everyone, individuals are different…*

7. Phase One Discussion

The findings and broad themes presented in the previous section will now be discussed in relation to the research questions for this study and the existing literature in this area.

The first aim of phase one was to explore how adolescent females with autism feel about their social experiences in mainstream school. Specifically, it investigated the ways in which they feel they belong and the ways in which they feel excluded in the school environment. It also explored what adolescent females with autism feel would enhance their social experiences in mainstream school.

7.1 Ways in which adolescent females with autism feel a sense of belonging within the school environment

Reciprocal friendships

Friendship was suggested as an important prerequisite for belonging. Some pupils discussed the factors that set apart "true friends" who added to their sense of belonging, compared to other peers at school. For some pupils, this was determined by feeling "comfortable", understood and by the reciprocal kindness they experienced with their friend. The pupils' ability to distinguish and describe "true" friendship in this way is perhaps surprising, considering the association of autism with difficulties around social interaction and reciprocity (Kopp & Gillberg, 2011; Myles & Simpson, 2001). However, verbal interaction was not seen as a key aspect of friendship by all participants. For one pupil, her sense of belonging was linked to the "comfortable silence" that she was able to have with particular friends. Another explained that when her friend came to her house, they would often enjoy watching You Tube clips together and not necessarily talk with each other. This suggests that the physical proximity and company provided by friendship was enough to elicit a sense of belonging for these pupils. Furthermore, the current findings support recent research suggesting that females with autism are motivated to seek social contact and to make and maintain friendships (Calder et al., 2013; Sedgewick et al., 2016; Tierney et al., 2016).

Pupils often emphasised the significance of friendship and social support for their well-being. For many pupils, a sense of belonging was associated with happiness, which was linked to time with friends. This finding is reflective of the views and experiences of the wider population. Coverdale and Long (2015) found that young people identified friends as one of the most important factors in regards to supporting and promoting their emotional well-being. Furthermore, the current findings support research suggesting that social connectedness and a sense of belonging in school impacts on engagement, motivation and likelihood of withdrawal (Finn, 1989; Osterman, 2000). Pupils suggested that their friendships lead to them possessing a more positive attitude towards school and a higher level of motivation to attend. One pupil explained "there were times where I'd only go in to school because I wanted to see my friends." The findings are also consistent with the large body of research suggesting that a sense of belonging can be a protective factor in regards to mental health and needs to be promoted within the school environment (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; DfE, 2015; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Gilligan, 2000).

Feeling safe and supported

Participants made reference to the challenges of attending a large and busy school site. Factors that promoted a sense of safety and security in school were seen as important. These fell into two categories; support through peer relationships and support within the school environment. Pupils emphasised that it was important to locate friends and "stick together" during break times to feel more confident in the busy school environment. This could be one of the reasons underlying the "clingy" behaviour described by Rivet and Matson (2011) in relation to females with autism. The number of students and the size of the secondary school environment was perceived as challenging by the majority of pupils, as found by Hill (2014). This differs from the findings of Sancho and Cline (2012) that neuro-typical pupils saw the larger size of the secondary school as fostering a sense of belonging. The participants in the current study expressed a preference for smaller, quiet areas of school, "away from everybody"; and where they had the option to talk to familiar peers or staff members. The level of sensory stimulation

in the school environment was also identified as a challenge by adolescent females with autism in Tierney et al.'s (2016) research.

Encouragement and inclusion

Pupils tended to describe a greater sense of belonging in situations where they felt valued and acknowledged by others. One pupil described belonging as "wanting to be there and feeling that people want you to be there." For some pupils, this could be as simple as a peer greeting them. This has similarities to the "valued involvement" dimension of the Hagerty et al. (1992) model of belonging. The authors propose that one defining feature of belonging is that an individual feels valued, needed and accepted within the environment. This was reflected in pupils' descriptions of instances where peers had made an effort to include them. One pupil explained that without friends, "it's just you and nothing. You would be just sat there bored…" It was often implied that friends made group participation possible through encouragement to join in. Pupils seemed to feel unable to make the decision to join in themselves and needed the approval and support of their peers to do so. This is consistent with findings that females with autism tend to go overlooked by their peers and remain on the periphery of a social group (Attwood, 2006; Dean et al., 2014). The current findings suggest that female pupils with autism have a desire to be included, but require some support to move in from the periphery. It should also be mentioned that pupils expressed a wish for social involvement at times, but also had a need for periods of relief, away from others. This highlights the importance of considering the extent to which individuals with autism desire encouragement to participate in different situations, as suggested by Calder et al. (2013).

Opportunities to 'talk it through'

Pupils placed high importance on having access to individuals who would listen to problems, worries and anxieties. For the majority of pupils, these opportunities to "talk it through" came through friends. Similarly, Coombes, Appleton, Allen and Yerrell (2013) found that secondary school pupils identified friends as an

important social resource for managing stressful situations. Discussing social problems with friends was deemed important for emotional health and well-being. It could be argued that the current findings challenge the assumption that individuals with autism generally dislike verbal interaction. Whilst females with autism have some social communication difficulties, they also have a need to share and work through problems, just as other adolescents do. This reflects the findings of Sedgewick et al. (2016) that shared talk was identified as a significant element of friendship by females with and without autism. Some pupils in the current study also identified key members of staff who they felt they could talk to and reflect on social situations with. One pupil discussed her mentor and explained that "She talks to me and finds ways to… how to help me." This implies that social support is essential for females with autism to be able to share and work through their concerns and worries during adolescence.

Feeling understood

Pupils identified particular individuals who they felt understood them and the challenges they experienced in school. The suggestion that "some teachers are more understanding than others" could reflect the level of awareness regarding how autism is expressed in females. It could also support the need for more training and greater understanding of how to support females with autism, as proposed by Moyse and Porter (2015). Pupils felt better understood by teachers who considered seating carefully, clarified instructions and information; and understood when the pupils were not in the mood to talk.

Pupils saw it as important to spend time with peers who could empathise with their difficulties. Some found it helpful to talk to others who had their own difficulties and this seemed to provide a sense of unity for many of the pupils. One pupil discussed her bond with a peer who "knows how it feels to be autistic". As a "minority within a minority" (Faherty, 2006, p.10), it may be that female pupils with autism attempt to identify with others where possible in order to feel a greater sense of belonging.

Similar interests and values with others were seen to increase the likelihood of making and maintaining friends. Pupils also recognised this as a good basis for conversation and creating opportunities to engage in shared interests together outside school. One pupil discussed her conversations with a peer who liked "similar music", while another spoke about her and her friend's shared sense of humour, explaining how they "laugh about a lot of stuff… the same things." This theme relates to "fit", the second dimension of belonging proposed by Hagerty et al. (1992). The model describes "fit" as an individual's sense that their characteristics articulate with or complement the environment. Pupils seemed to feel a sense of identity with peers who shared their values and interests. Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and self-categorisation theory (Turner et al., 1987) propose that group membership has an important influence on self-esteem and the self-concept. Pupils did not tend to place as much importance on group membership compared to friendships with individuals, suggesting that identification with key individuals was enough to contribute to a more positive self-concept and a sense of belonging. As Kelly (2001) points out, some individuals require numerous social contacts to develop a sense of belonging, whilst others need relatively few.

Establishing and adhering to social expectations

Adapting one's behaviour to "get along with people" emerged as another important aspect of belonging. Pesonen et al. (2015) obtained similar findings from the retrospective accounts of women with autism, who recalled adapting their behaviour in school to fit in. This is also consistent with the notion that females with autism are adept at hiding their difficulties by mirroring others (Attwood, 2006). Participants in the current study suggested that adhering to social norms within school is key in order to be accepted and liked by peers. It was evident that participants had gained a sense of typical female behaviour as "chatty", "fun" and "bubbly"; and attempted to exhibit this where possible. This seems to compliment the suggestion of Faherty (2006) that females with autism must contend with the assumptions that society has of the female gender as sociable, caring and empathetic. Participants reported watching their friends and peers and attempting to "do whatever they're doing." It was suggested that this

helped to determine how to behave in certain situations, which paid off socially. It could be argued that females with autism have to take on a different role in order to feel a sense of belonging in school. Equally, adapting one's behaviour to fit in with social norms is something that is likely to motivate the majority of adolescents, due to the importance of peer relationships and social acceptance at this stage (McElhaney, Antonishak & Allen, 2008). It may be that the effort and energy that goes in to this is greater for females on the autistic spectrum due to their social difficulties.

7.2 Ways in which adolescent females with autism feel excluded within the school environment

Being on the periphery

Managing group situations was identified as a challenging social aspect of school. Pupils described their experiences of being "on the outside" of social groups and not feeling that their contribution was valued, or acknowledged. In contrast to the encouragement to participate, which was identified as promoting belonging, pupils recalled instances where peers had excluded them and left them out of social arrangements and activities. A number of studies have highlighted the difficulties that children and young people with autism can experience with social isolation and bullying (Muller et al., 2008; Humphrey & Symes, 2010). However, in line with Dean et al. (2014), participants in the current study tended to describe feelings of being ignored, rather than being directly bullied or overtly excluded. The current findings also demonstrate the ability of females with autism to give the outward impression that they are part of a social group. Participants shared their experiences of staying physically close to a social group, but watching, rather than joining in. This reflects Attwood's (2007) description of females with autism masking their difficulties and disappearing into large groups. Some pupils felt that they did not have the necessary skills to participate in the conversation or activity taking place. Three pupils explained that they felt unable to join in with their peers who liked gymnastics and would "have to just stand there and watch them". This is consistent with suggestions that females with autism tend to lack social confidence and possess low self-esteem (Nichols et al., 2009).

Participants also shared experiences of feeling that they were unable to access and fully participate in all lessons. This was often due to the lesson being perceived as too challenging by the pupils. Understanding information and instructions was emphasised as a key area of difficulty for a number of individuals, with one pupil explaining that it sometimes felt like teachers were "talking another language". There was also a perception that teachers saw the participants' need for further explanation and clarification as a result of them not listening, rather than having difficulty processing verbal information. Pupils reported a tendency not to ask for help, or draw attention to themselves; particularly when they felt their needs were poorly understood by teachers. One pupil stated "I keep it to myself when I find something difficult". Newman (1991) found an association between adolescents' sense of belonging and their academic help-seeking behaviour, which further supports the notion that females with autism need to feel accepted and included in order to feel more confident to ask for support.

Feeling de- valued

A number of participants expressed the view that others underestimated them and did not value their contribution. Once again, this is consistent with the Hagerty et al. (1992) model of belonging, which emphasises the importance of "valued involvement". Two pupils felt that others thought they were "stupid" and treated them "like babies". As pointed out by Attwood (2006), females with autism are often mothered by female peers. However, participants suggested that it was the female staff in particular who tended to baby them; perhaps suggesting that this behaviour extends beyond peers. One participant explained that her sense of humour often caused others to get "offended really quickly" and that she could "irritate people" in this way. Tierney et al. (2016) found that adolescent females with autism reported unintentionally breaking social conventions. Similarly, pupils in the current study explained that teachers and peers sometimes thought they were being rude, or choosing not to listen when this was not their intention. One participant added "I don't mean to be annoying or anything but it's not like my fault really"; suggesting that she felt her difficulties affected others' perceptions of her unjustly.

Limited awareness and understanding of autism

Participants suggested that the limited awareness of autism throughout school could mean that their needs were not always well understood. Some pupils expressed concerns that the majority of teachers were completely unaware of their autism. Others suggested a need for staff to know "more about what was helpful" to them in school. Female pupils with autism tend to experience similar academic difficulties to male pupils, but often attempt to hide this (Nasen, 2016). It is suggested that school staff need a greater level of understanding when it comes to detecting and supporting the needs of females with autism (Gould & Ashton-Smith, 2011; Moyse & Porter, 2015). Some participants also explained that their peers had difficulty understanding "how to cope" with their autism and why they struggle with particular aspects of school. One pupil recalled instances where peers did not believe she had autism, as she did not behave in the same way as boys that they knew with the condition. She explained "that kind of made me feel irrelevant… like it didn't matter. So if I didn't understand something I'd be like 'Uh… never mind'". This reflects the notion that the current understanding of autism is male-biased, making females more likely to be misunderstood and to fall under the radar (Dworzynski et al., 2012).

Desire for identification with others

Participants discussed feeling like "the odd one out" and their desire to find someone who they could identify with. One pupil expressed her wish to find "a girl who's autistic… but not like really bad." Participants explained that the majority of females with autism they encountered had a higher level of need and that it was difficult to find individuals they could fully relate to. To minimise her differences, one pupil explained "I try not to let my autistic side of me show". The females with autism in Cridland et al.'s (2014) research shared their experience of living with a condition that was associated with males. Similarly, Faherty (2006) emphasises the challenge of being a minority within a unique group in society. Dean et al. (2014) found that females with autism tend to have neuro-typical friends, as did many participants in this study. However, some pupils still had an unmet need for friends who they felt a sense of identity with. Two pupils were

aware that their interest in dolls and teddies was not considered normal for their age, commenting that "Most people don't do that when they're 13 or 14." They suggested that they would like to find a peer who shared and understood this interest, which again highlights the importance that females with autism place on having friends with common interests.

Stigma surrounding difference and difficulty

Participants were conscious of a degree of stigma surrounding autism and their differences to peers. Some pupils reported that their peers were unaware of their diagnosis and expressed worries about what their reaction would be on finding out they had a "special need problem." Within the literature it is suggested that an individual's disclosure of their autism can be a difficult and stressful process (Davison & Henderson, 2010; Pesonen et al., 2015). Furthermore, Cridland et al. (2014) found that adolescent females with autism felt they were excluded by peers on the basis that they had a disability. Participants in the current study reported similar experiences and a general view that "if it's not normal, it's not ok…" Pupils explained that the behaviour of both peers and staff tended to change when they became aware of their autism. One pupil suggested that this may be due to adults' perceptions that she would be likely to have "anger issues" and "trash the whole place". Once again, this suggests that there is a common perception that females with autism are likely to exhibit the externalising behaviours more often seen from males with autism. Furthermore, behaviour that is expected or considered acceptable may differ for females and males with autism.

Social skills

Despite a desire to engage and spend time with peers, a number of pupils discussed their feelings of anxiety in relation to social encounters. It is suggested that while females with autism are socially motivated, they still exhibit social-communication difficulties (Nasen, 2016). However, females with autism are more adept at masking these than males (Lai et al., 2015). Some pupils shared experiences where they had decided not to approach peers, or meet up with

friends due to their concerns about "what to do in social situations" and the potential for it to become "awkward". Additionally, participants discussed the challenges of managing the complexities of female friendships such as arguments, jealousy and gossiping. This is also referred to as relational conflict (Nichols et al., 2009). Sedgewick et al. (2016) found that females with autism reported high levels of relational conflict in their friendships. Participants in the current study often reported that they found it easier to manage individual friendships or small groups, which they described as "not too complicated". It was suggested that this reduced the likelihood of conflict and exclusion. This compliments the work of Muller et al. (2008), who found that individuals with autism tend to prefer and feel more at ease during one-on-one interaction. The current findings highlight that for adolescent females with autism, limited social skills can have a significant impact of their self-perception and their confidence to participate in social interactions and events.

7.3 What adolescent females with autism feel would support them socially in mainstream school

The second aim of phase one was to explore what adolescent females with autism feel would support them with the social challenges of mainstream school. The themes that emerged in relation to this research question will now be discussed.

Safe social spaces

One participant suggested that access to a base, or a tutor room during break and lunch times would make these unstructured periods more manageable, as it would mean that she would "know where everyone else would be". It may be that the consistency of having one agreed base would provide a sense of security and ease anxieties about having to manage larger, busier areas of the school. This also links with pupils' suggestions that safe spaces in school tend to promote their sense of belonging. Iland (2006) discusses the challenges of managing school lunchtimes as a female with autism and the level of thought and planning that can be required to meet friends or find a group to eat with.

Creating social opportunities

It was suggested that opportunities to work with likeminded individuals would be a good way of developing new friendships. Pupils also suggested that it would be useful for teachers to "notice people getting on really well" and to take this into consideration when organising seating plans and group work. Likewise, Kuo, Orsmond, Cohn and Coster (2013) identify a need to be aware of the social opportunities offered to pupils with autism in different activities with peers; and use these to scaffold and promote the formation of friendship.

Increase autism awareness throughout school

Three participants suggested that it would be beneficial to raise awareness of autism throughout their school. One pupil proposed that having adult speakers with autism would increase peer understanding and "help the confidence of those with autism". Another suggestion was that staff could raise autism awareness within tutor groups in order to encourage acceptance and understanding. Up to date pupil profiles were also suggested as a way of communicating needs and key strategies to staff. Similarly, guidance from Nasen (2016) emphasises the importance of building whole school knowledge of autism and how it presents in females; creating an "enabling" school environment.

Resources to support social skills and well-being

Pupils identified a need for resources to support them to manage social situations. Pupils suggested that they had received limited support with this area; particularly during primary school. The majority of social interventions designed to support individuals with autism are developed and trialled with primarily male samples (Laugeson, Frankel, Gantman, Dillon & Mogil, 2012; MacKay, Knott & Dunlop, 2007). Gould and Ashton-Smith (2011) suggest that schools need to provide support around social skills and relationships; specifically aimed at females. One pupil discussed the books and films that provided her with a "social commentary"

and helped her to “understand what was going on” with the social interactions she saw and experienced within school. However, she noted that it was up to her to “work it out by observation”. Additionally, it was suggested that opportunities to meet with other females with autism could be useful for sharing strategies to manage social situations and “ways to solve things”. This is consistent with the pupils’ desire for identification with their peers, as discussed previously.

8. Phase Two Methods

8.1 Participants

School staff

I created an information letter for staff from the three schools involved in phase one of the research. The letter explained the purpose of the study and invited them to take part in a staff focus group at their school. The SENCo at each school passed on the letter to staff who taught or supported at least one female pupil with autism. Through email correspondence with the SENCo I arranged the date, time and location of each focus group. Ten members of staff across the three schools agreed to take part, including four staff members from School 1, two staff members from School 2 and four staff members from School 3. Further details regarding the staff who participated in the three focus groups are as follows:

	Gender	**Role**
School 1:	Female	SENCo
	Male	Assistant Head
	Female	Teaching Assistant
	Female	Tutor and Teacher
School 2:	Female	SENCo
	Female	Teaching Assistant
School 3:	Female	Teaching Assistant
	Female	Specialist Teaching Assistant
	Female	Specialist Autism Teacher
	Female	Teaching Assistant

Table 7. Phase two focus group participant details

Parents

The parents of the pupils asked to take part in phase one of the study were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews. As part of the letter requesting written permission for their daughter to take part in phase one, parents were asked to indicate whether they would be happy to participate in phase two. Ten pupils' parents were contacted and five gave signed consent to take part in the parent interviews. All of the parents were mothers of female pupils from either School 1 or School 2, who had participated in phase one of the research. Parents who agreed to take part provided their contact details on the consent form, which was returned to me via their daughter's school. I contacted parents by email or telephone to arrange the date and location of the interviews.

8.2 Parent Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used to explore the views of the parents of adolescent females with autism in regards to the social challenges of mainstream school and the support needed to address these. The first part of the interview was based on the pupil interview schedule from phase one, with questions adapted appropriately to address parents. In the second part of the interview, parents were presented with the themes that had emerged from the pupil interviews, with anonymised quotes to illustrate each theme (see Appendix 6). Parents were asked what support and provision they felt was necessary to address the social challenges identified by the pupils. Individual parent interviews were used to gain insight into parents' personal views and experiences of their daughter's needs.

8.3 Staff Focus Groups

Focus groups were used to seek the views of school staff who support female pupils with autism in regards to the social challenges of mainstream school and how to address these most effectively. The structure of the focus groups replicated that of the parent interview. The reason for using focus groups to explore staff

views was to gain the perspectives of multiple staff members, with varying roles. The aim was to seek a collective, as opposed to individual staff view; and to compare this to parent views.

8.4 Procedure

Parent Interviews

Parents were given the opportunity to choose where they would prefer to be interviewed. Two parents chose to be interviewed at their daughter's school, two chose to be interviewed at home and one chose to be interviewed in a café. Before starting the interview I reminded participants that their responses would be anonymous and confidential. The purpose of the interview was clearly explained and parents were given the opportunity to ask any questions about their participation. Interviews lasted for approximately one hour. They were recorded using a Dictaphone and transcribed using Microsoft Word.

Focus Groups

Three focus groups were carried out; one in each of the three schools that agreed to participate. Focus groups took place on the school site either during, or at the end of the school day. The purpose of the research and the format of the focus group was explained to all participants. Information on anonymity and confidentiality was also provided. Participants were each asked to sign a consent form to confirm their understanding and agreement to take part in the focus group. The stages proposed by Vaughn, Schumm and Sinagub (1996) were adapted and used to guide the format of the focus group. These included the following: welcome, purpose, guidelines, warm up, discussion, wrap up, member check, closing statements. The duration of each focus group was approximately one hour. They were recorded using a Dictaphone and transcribed in Microsoft Word.

8.5 Analysis

The semi-structured interviews and focus groups were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As in phase one, this followed a six stage process, which included:

1) Transcription and repeated reading of transcripts to increase familiarity
2) Generating initial codes and mapping out initial themes
3) Repeated examination of the data to ascertain emerging themes
4) Review and refinement of themes
5) Finalising and naming themes
6) Reporting the findings

See Appendix 9 for more details on the stages of thematic analysis for phase two.

As in phase one, the transcripts were read by three colleagues who had a good understanding of the focus of the research and who expressed agreement regarding the codes and themes generated from thematic analysis.

8.6 Ethics

Ethical considerations from phase one were adhered to. Signed consent to participation was obtained from all parents and school staff (see Appendix 8 for parent and staff consent forms).

9. Phase Two Findings

This section details the findings from the semi-structured interviews with parents of adolescent females with autism; and the focus groups with school staff who support adolescent females with autism.

Thematic analysis generated key themes corresponding to the research questions for phase two of the study. A summary of the themes and sub-themes relating to each research question are presented, illustrated by relevant quotes taken from the interview transcripts.

The following codes are used to refer to participants throughout the transcripts:

Code	**Participant**
P1-5	Parents 1-5
S1-S	School 1 SENCo
S1-AH	School 1 Assistant Head
S1-TA	School 1 Teaching Assistant
S1-T	School 1Tutor/Teacher
S2-S	School 2 SENCo
S2-TA	School 2 Teaching Assistant
S3-TA1	School 3Teaching Assistant 1
S3-STA	School 3 Specialist Teaching Assistant
S3-AT	School 3Specialist Autism Teacher
S3-TA2	School 3 Teaching Assistant 2

Table 8. Phase two participant codes for transcripts

9.1 Research Question 1a: What are the social challenges for adolescent females with autism in mainstream school from the perspective of parents?

The social challenges discussed by parents formed five key themes including: school and classroom environment; development; social norms and expectations; barriers to peer interaction; and staff awareness and understanding.

Themes	**Sub-themes**
School and classroom environment	Easily overlooked
	Unstructured social situations
Development	Delayed development
	Personal care and puberty
Social norms and expectations	Aiming to be normal
	Expectations of adolescent females
	Pressure around achievement
Barriers to peer interaction	Conversation skills
	Feeling left out
	Managing female friendships
Staff awareness and understanding	Communication with teachers
	Coming across rude
	Staff awareness of autism

Table 9. Final themes and sub-themes for phase two research question 1a

Theme 1: School and classroom environment

Easily overlooked

Parents commented on the high likelihood of their daughter going overlooked in the busy secondary school environment.

P1: *... obviously it's a big school and I think there's the capacity to get lost… and lost in those unstructured times. I think Sophia probably did get lost in those younger years in unstructured times.*

P2: *...she was quiet, so that's why she was missed.*

This reflected the views of the pupils in phase one, who expressed a preference for small group situations, where they felt safe and acknowledged. Parents also suggested that their daughter's views and contributions were often not heard or accepted by others.

P5: *And (SENCo) is absolutely brilliant, but Zara feels as though her side doesn't get listened to and nobody believes her.*

Comparing this to the phase one findings, pupils discussed instances where they did not feel heard within a group, but they also recognised the difference between this and the individual interactions, where they could discuss their thoughts, feelings and concerns more freely and ably.

Unstructured social situations

Break times and lunch times were identified as a challenging part of the school day due to the lack of structure and the high level of sensory stimulation.

P1: *So because she likes learning and she likes lessons, she'll deal fine with the formal part of school, but unstructured bits she's struggled with.*

P3: *I think the biggest issue for kids is the unstructured time. Some of them won't even approach another child because of how their interaction is going to be with that child.*

Parents suggested that their daughter had difficulty initiating social interaction; particularly in large group situations. They also found it hard to manage unexpected social interactions and responses.

P4: *She can't socially cope with a lot of girls together and that even goes down to three girls.*

This captures the point made by Scarlett in phase one that interacting with a large social group could actually be a lonely and over whelming experience. Both parent and pupil responses highlighted the need for predictability and a smaller social circle to make lunch and break times more manageable.

Theme 2: Development

Delayed development

Parents suggested that their daughter's delayed social and emotional development could set her apart from peers. It was suggested that having different interests, hobbies and priorities could make it more difficult to relate to peers of the same age.

P1: *... autistic people tend to develop a bit later as well and that may not help, because you're not necessarily sharing the same ideas and feelings as your peers in any case. And you'll have different priorities and different things you're interested in*

P2: *I don't think it helps that they're older than their years now and Saffy's got global delay still, emotionally, socially and academically. And that alienates her from the rest of her peers as well.*

Some described instances where their daughter had needed to learn which of their interests were not age appropriate and could alienate them.

P4: *She had a bit of a rough learning curve because she was really in to the film X. The girls in her class, who are actually, some of them 10 months older than her, teased her about it. And then it took her a while to realise that she shouldn't mention that.*

Whilst pupils in phase one recognised which of their interests were unusual for their age, some expressed a wish to find a peer who shared and understood this interest. Parent responses suggested that they were concerned about the reactions that other young people had to their daughter's interests; and wanted to support their daughter to fit in where possible.

One parent described her daughter's interest in dolls and babies, which she was able to discuss with young people who she had met online and who shared this interest. This parent recognised the benefits of her daughter using this as a way to find likeminded peers; helping her to feel that she was not alone and different to everyone.

P2: *She's got friends, but they're all online. And they're all into babies and they're all into re-borns and they're all into all that. But… so this friend she's got… There is one girl and she's 17 and she's really into babies and they chat all the time about babies. I think they egg each other on with the baby stuff, so I don't think it helps in that way. But it helps Saffy to not think that she's odd.*

She also suggested that the opportunity for her daughter to discuss her interest online reduced the extent to which she talked about this with peers at school.

P2: *I encourage it because it gets it out of her system and maybe it won't intensify it for Grace or Imogen. She can say what she wants to these other girls.*

Personal care and puberty

Some parents described their daughter's difficulty accepting puberty and engaging in the necessary self-care and hygiene routines.

P2: *... well she definitely doesn't worry about her appearance, because we're constantly nagging about brushing her hair and things like that. I don't think she worries. I don't think she's aware of having to fit in in that way.*

Others explained that their daughter had difficulty understanding and managing the emotions brought on by hormonal changes.

P5: *So you've got the hormones, you've got the periods… sort of all kicked in and the other emotions are not being accepted.*

Pupils in phase one did not tend to mention concerns regarding puberty, which could have demonstrated a limited awareness, or that they did not feel comfortable discussing this.

Theme 3: Social norms and expectations

Aiming to be 'normal'

A number of parents suggested that their daughter was very conscious of being different to peers and attempted to minimise this where possible. As highlighted by the pupil interviews, this resulted in a tendency for them not to ask for help. One parent also explained that her daughter's attempts to mask her differences meant that she had to hide who she is.

P1: *I think she's felt that she has to hide who she is to be able to fit in better. And I think that's been more and more marked, the further she's gone through.*

P3:*…she doesn't like asking for help because it draws attention to herself.*

P5: *…Because I know a lot of them don't like talking about the autism and everything else and don't want people knowing about it*

Expectations of adolescent females

Parents expressed concerns that their daughter's behaviour and appearance could be inconsistent with that of most females and that this could affect others' perceptions of them.

P2: *If she doesn't want to be picked on, if she doesn't want to stand out like a sore thumb, then she's going to need to… Like to just have a little bit of pride in her appearance. And not to smell and you know, have mis-matched clothes and stuff.*

Some of the pupils in phase one recognised that they were less interested in make-up and looks than their peers. They were conscious of the need to consider their

appearance in order to be accepted. However, they found it difficult to understand why this should have such a large impact on other people's opinion of them. Parents also referred to the subtle rules of social communication that tend to underlie female interactions and their daughter's difficulty understanding these.

P3: *But I think the society we live in is so judgemental that it's very difficult for people with ASD to understand the complex levels of interaction with other people. It's those invisible demands, those invisible rules that are not spoken about, but we're expected to know.*

Pupils in phase one did not comment specifically on the expectations of females compared to males. However, Darcy and Charlie distinguished themselves from the 'girly girls' in their year group, which suggests that they were aware of not necessarily fitting the female stereotype.

Pressure around achievement

It was suggested that fear of failure and academic pressure had a significant impact on emotional well-being. Some parents explained that their daughter tended to compare herself to others and withdraw from learning tasks that were perceived as too challenging.

P3: *... It's when they start putting the pressure on for the learning, that's when Scarlett goes in to withdrawal. She finds that hard to do the multi-tasking of learning and interacting with people around her.*

P3: *Scarlett, if she doesn't get it right the first time, she's a failure. And I feel schools do put that pressure on them.*

This reflects the pupils' comments about feeling stupid and their attempts to avoid drawing attention when they needed help or clarification. Another parent suggested that her daughter strived for academic perfection and this affected the extent to which she socialised with others.

P1: *... I dislike the government targets because every time Sophia has a report, her target grades are A, A, A, A, A and projected grades are never going to be*

better than that. She finds that very difficult and if they're worse than that, she considers herself to be a failure.

Theme 4: Barriers to peer interaction

Conversation skills

Whilst the pupils in phase one commented on feeling left out and ignored, parents suggested that this could in part be due to the difficulties that their daughters had with initiating and engaging in reciprocal conversation. Parents suggested that this gave the impression that peers were not listening or allowing them into their discussions.

P2: *... she does really want to be friends with people, but she doesn't know how to initiate it. Or she can start it off, but then she does things to alienate herself and push people away.*

P1: *I know Sophia sometimes, she thinks she's not being listened to, but actually she's hardly said anything… And she doesn't always listen to other people actually either.*

Parents also suggested that their daughter found it difficult to gauge when to stop talking about her particular interest and that this could discourage peers to include her in conversations.

P3: *She can be very intense and I think she needs to learn that she doesn't need to be that intense around people. That's the part that people can't cope with.*

Feeling left out

As suggested by the pupils in phase one, parents explained that their daughters had a desire for social inclusion and friendship, but were often outside or on the periphery of social groups.

P1: *... I know that she would like to be included in groups, but she hasn't got the social skills to be able to… so she'll stand on the outskirts.*

P3: *…they want to belong. They want to feel part of it. But they always feel that they're on the outside looking in.*

Parents also described situations where their daughters had reported feeling excluded and that they were not valued by others. Whether or not this was partly due to their daughter's difficulty with social skills, parents expressed concerns about how this made their daughter feel.

P5: *She will talk to people, but people will talk and then sort of turn around and ignore her.*

Managing female friendships

Parents discussed the challenges that their daughters experienced with managing friendships with other females. One parent explained that her daughter had two friends who disliked each other and that she had struggled to manage and understand this.

P2: …*they're very separate friendships…*
Because she meets up with Grace or Imogen, she does feel torn between them sometimes.

Other parents spoke about the difficulties that their daughters had with the level of verbal interaction involved in female friendships and unpicking the responses of their peers.

P5: *I think girls are worse than boys, because boys just turn around and lump them one as such. But girls don't. It's the words and the words are more hurtful.*

Pupils did not tend to draw comparisons between male and female friendships in the same way as parents. However, they recognised the challenge and complication that could come with managing a friendship group, compared to one key friendship.

Theme 5: Staff awareness and understanding

Communication with teachers

Parents referred to the difficulties that their daughter could have with processing and understanding spoken information and instructions. As suggested by pupils in phase one, some parents commented that teachers were not always aware of this difficulty, which could affect their daughter's ability to access learning and express their views and ideas.

P2: *I think if they knew that they couldn't always understand what somebody was saying… I think it's like if you read a text message, you could read it in quite a few different ways. That's how I always envision Saffy sees things sometimes.*

Coming across rude

Parents gave examples of instances where their daughter had been perceived as rude by teachers. Often this was their way of expressing their views, or an aspect of the environment that they were having difficulty with.

P1: *So it's looking for those signs of no eye contact and seeming very rude because she's desperate to get out of the situation… So it's understanding those sorts of signs… not then shouting at her because I think that is sometimes what happens.*

Parents also suggested that school staff need to be aware of the signs and behaviour that indicate discomfort or lack of understanding.

P3: *Her art teacher said to me one evening, Scarlett's getting quite rude and cocky. And I thought well that's Scarlett trying to tell you she wanted to be in a room on her own, away from the rest of the students.*

This reflects the comments of pupils in phase one, who suggested that some teachers disliked them, as they presumed they did not listen. The responses of both pupils and parents suggest that the behaviour of females with autism can be easily misunderstood within the school environment.

Staff awareness of autism

Parents expressed concerns that staff were unaware of their daughter's autism and how to identify and support her needs.

P1: *…it's not that the teachers aren't caring, it's just that they're not aware enough of the condition and the signs…*

P3: *She does feel that people aren't aware of her autism...*

One parent described her attempts to make staff aware of her daughter's difficulties throughout primary school and the tendency of staff to ignore these.

P3: *This is where ASD training needs to happen for teachers… I'd regularly have teachers saying 'Can you speed Scarlett up. She's not quick enough in class'. Now surely that is an indicator that she's got processing problems…*

Similarly, pupils in phase one compared teachers who did and those who did not have a good understanding of their strengths and areas of difficulty. Some pupils also questioned the extent to which teachers were aware of their diagnosis.

9.2 Research Question 1b: What are the social challenges for adolescent females with autism in mainstream school from the perspective of school staff?

The social challenges identified by school staff formed four broad themes including: peer interactions; society; school environment; and adults. A number of sub-themes also emerged from the overall themes, which are illustrated with relevant data below.

Themes	**Sub-themes**
Peer interactions	Minimising difference
	Social identity
	Managing friendships
	Social communication
Society	Expected female behaviour
	Perceptions of autism
	Vulnerability
	Hidden social rules
School environment	Classroom layout
	Unstructured time
Adults	Staff understanding
	Parent anxieties

Table 10. Final themes and sub-themes for phase two research question 1b

Theme 1: Peer Interactions

Minimising difference

In a similar way to parents, staff suggested that the pupils' perceptions of social situations could sometimes cause increased anxiety about being different or excluded. Furthermore, they highlighted the challenge of re-framing these perceptions.

S1-AH: *So she's quite paranoid about what other girls think of her and what they say about her.*

S2-AT: *I think girls are more aware and realise their differences far earlier on and to a greater extent. They see themselves as different and the moment they've got that locked in their head, it's very hard to say 'We're all different in different ways.'*

Staff also commented on the impact that internalising worries and anxieties could have on the pupils' mental health and well-being.

S2-STA: *She thought that everyone was looking at her and everyone was watching her and everyone thought she was stupid. So her perception sometimes makes these problems into huge things she can't get passed.*

Social identity

Consistent with pupil views in phase one, staff highlighted the extent to which female pupils, including those with autism, have a need for belonging and acceptance.

S3-TA: *I think with girls, what I've noticed a lot is a real… there's a real sense of a need to belong…*
… if we've fallen out with you, you don't belong. And that's a big rejection.

It was suggested that some female pupils with autism have the view that they are outsiders and have difficulty identifying with other females.

S2-STA: *And also with them feeling a bit like they're not like other girls… So it's hard to find somewhere to fit in.*

Furthermore, staff implied that some pupils did not accept their autism as part of their identity and were not confident that they fitted in with a particular social group.

S2- TA 2: *I think they're not quite sure… or comfortable about themselves at all.*

S2-AT: *Tessa's in denial and she went through a phase last summer of saying 'I'm going to be undiagnosed, I haven't got this. They got it wrong.'*

Similarly, some of the pupils in phase one described their autism as a very salient, but unwanted element of their identity. Meanwhile, there were parents who recognised that this could prevent their daughter from being herself in school.

Managing friendships

Like parents, staff suggested that female pupils could have difficulty forming and maintaining friendships. Resolving arguments and understanding how to repair relationships was also identified as a particular challenge.

S1-S: *But Holly, we had to do some work with her, because her way of having a friend… was buying friendship.*

S2-AT: *She finds that whole friendship thing really challenging. You know, actually finding somebody on a similar wavelength enough of the time…*

S2-AT: *You know I think difficult experiences, you really have to break it down. Like friendships or people falling out, that's really hard.*

As implied by the pupils in phase one, staff suggested that forming a single, close friendship was seen as more desirable and easier to manage than a larger friendship group, but this could be difficult to find.

S3-TA: *She did belong to a group of friends because she desperately tried to fit in with them. But she struggled enormously. But she just wanted one best friend really and she never actually got that.*

This suggests that while female pupils with autism may appear to be part of a social group, this does not necessarily provide them with the sense of belonging that they desire.

Social communication

Staff suggested that the peer interactions of females with autism could be affected by difficulties with social communication. Misunderstanding of others' comments and behaviour was noted as a particular challenge; as was awareness of when to contribute and listen during conversations.

S2-AT: …*they can't understand why no one wants to listen any more or why they don't want to be part of the conversation.*

Another common suggestion was that the pupils could be unaware of how they came across to others during social interactions.

S3-S: *But her conversation style is quite curt and short isn't it? So it doesn't necessarily engage somebody to want to talk to her. But I don't know whether she has an understanding of how she's coming across to other people…*

This was also identified as a challenge by parents, who expressed concerns that their daughter could come across as rude to staff when this was not her intention.

Theme 2: Society

Expected female behaviour

It was suggested that female pupils with autism sometimes behaved in a way that was inconsistent with society's ideas about 'typical' females.

S2-AT:*… well she stood out as a younger girl here, because she would bite and kick and push and shout and be opinionated and… do all those things that you really didn't want to have with year 5 and 6 girls.*

Staff from one school proposed that 'quirky' behaviour was more likely to be considered acceptable in males and was more likely to result in social isolation for females.

S3-TA: *And I don't know if it's more accepted in boys. I'm just thinking about James, he's very very quirky and that is accepted among his peers and adults…*

The pupils in phase one did not explicitly mention a sense that there were different expectations for males and females with autism. However, Scarlett discussed her peers finding it difficult to accept her being 'alternative.' This also reflects the parents' concerns that their daughter did not always understand and behave in accordance with social expectations for females.

Perceptions of autism

It was suggested that assumptions and stereotypes relating to autism could create inaccurate expectations of females with autism. This reflected the comments of Darcy in phase one, that others would expect her to be angry or aggressive when they discovered she had autism. Staff proposed that society's understanding of autism in females needed to develop in order to address this.

S1-AH: *… you can put great practice in, but a lot of it comes down to the students themselves and the attitudes and prejudices they already have when they arrive at school.*

S2-STA: *The awareness that it's a spectrum disorder sometimes isn't always at the fore front of people's understanding.*

Vulnerability

Staff discussed the various ways in which female pupils with autism are vulnerable within today's society. Body image and self-esteem were reported as challenges for some pupils.

S2-AT: *Jo would roll up her skirt and you'd have to talk to her about… because she'd see other people doing it… She doesn't get any of the vulnerability side of it…*

S2-AT: *And I think that frightens parents a lot, of girls with autism, that the whole kind of link with mental health and eating disorders; with self-harm and it*

all kind of comes with that negative feeling about their body, negative feeling about who they are and where they fit in.

Social media was also discussed as an area in which these pupils are vulnerable; particularly as some used this as a way of meeting peers who shared their interests and who they felt they could relate to.

S3-TA: *And I think that was our worry about her going online and finding, searching for somebody because you know… You know 'Are you certain that this girl is a girl?*

In comparison, parents and pupils were more likely to discuss the benefits of social media in finding friends who understood and identified with their interests. Parents were also aware of a need to monitor their daughter's online activities and intervene if necessary.

Hidden social rules

Staff described instances where female pupils with autism had demonstrated limited awareness of social rules. Some examples involved understanding humour and unintentionally causing offence. This could have an impact on interactions with both peers and teachers.

S2-AT: *It's all those very little, kind of subtle social cues and things that girls do. They're just so difficult to understand and unpick I think, for girls on the spectrum.*

S2-STA: *I'd come back after the summer holidays and I'd put on a bit of weight. … And then she was like 'Thought black was meant to be slimming.'*

S1-AH: *But there is a kind of a deficit in terms of social understanding; a nuance of social interaction and language. Non-verbal stuff as well…*

Some of the pupils in phase one also recognised instances where they had shocked or upset others. Scarlett suggested that this was most likely due to other people being sensitive and did not seem to understand why her words had caused offence.

Theme 3: School environment

Classroom layout

Staff suggested that the layout of the classroom could have an impact on the anxiety levels of some females with autism. Staff at one school commented specifically on the impact of the seating arrangement. For some of their pupils, sitting at the back of the classroom enabled them to feel less self-conscious and more able to concentrate.

S2-AT: *...they can sit here near the door, with nobody behind them and then she's going to relax and actually you're going to get a lot more out of her because she can feel she can focus on the work rather than who's sitting behind me or can I get out of the room if I need to leave...*

The impact of seating and grouping was also mentioned as important by some of the pupils in phase one. For example, Sophia explained that she appreciated her teacher allowing her to sit where she felt most comfortable.

Unstructured time

Like the parents, staff described the sensory challenges and lack of structure that came with lunch time; making this a difficult time for some females with autism.

S1-S: *And tutor group time at lunch time is free time. So in all of the tutor groups, you go in there, it's noisy, everybody's moving around, they like to play music, they're sitting on desks. All the things that are going to make somebody 'arrgh!' And the anxiety levels go up and immediately.*

Theme 4: Adults

Staff understanding

Some members of staff identified gaps in their knowledge in regards to autism in females. It was suggested that staff understanding of autism tended to be more relevant to the way it typically presents in males.

S1-T: *I think it's awareness isn't it. Because I started as an NQT. Having Zara and Charlotte both in my tutor group, it was a bit like… I didn't really have that much training on my training course…*

S3-S: *I think some teachers with girls in particular don't recognise autism. They see it very clearly in the boys and they can identify it really clearly. But I don't think they can identify it with the girls.*

Staff also expressed concerns that the needs of females with autism were more easily missed due to their more subtle symptoms.

S2-AT: *Parents evening… a teacher… went and told mum 'She doesn't act like a child with autism does she?' She doesn't chuck chairs.*

As noted by parents and pupils, there were also members of staff who had a more advanced understanding of autism and could potentially disseminate their knowledge.

Parent anxieties

One school discussed the impact of parent anxieties on pupils' school experiences. It was suggested that some parents were concerned about their daughter's ability to manage the social aspects of school and that this could impact on pupils' self-perception and independence.

S1-S: *Things had gone wrong in primary school and mum wasn't happy, so she kept her at home. Mum did not believe she could come and be at school. It wasn't ever going to work…But mum would sit with Charlotte, who is a very tall girl on her lap in reception in front of everybody else.*

This partly reflects the comments of the pupils in phase one in regards to feeling that others treated them like younger children. However, the pupils suggested that this also applied to the way that staff and peers behaved towards them.

9.3 Research Question 2a: What support and provision is needed to address the challenges identified by adolescent females with autism in mainstream school from the perspective of parents?

Thematic analysis generated six main themes in regards to the support and provision suggested by the parents of adolescent females with autism. These are outlined below, with their corresponding sub-themes.

Themes	**Sub-themes**
Semi-structured social opportunities	
Practice and review of social situations	
Preparation for secondary school	
Early education around difference and diversity	
Raise staff awareness	Staff training
	Autism champion teacher
Opportunities to check in	A safe space
	A key person

Table 11. Final themes and sub-themes for phase two research question 2a

Theme 1: Semi-structured social opportunities

In response to the pupils' comments about being on the periphery, a parent suggested that her daughter may benefit from invitations to extra-curricular clubs or activities; to provide opportunities to interact with others who have similar interests. It was proposed that these groups need to involve a shared goal or collaborative project, creating a basis for conversation and team work. Additionally, it was suggested that these opportunities could benefit all pupils who experience difficulties with the social aspects of school, not just those with autism.

P1: *She needed something a bit more… without it being enforced, but a bit more structure… … and ideally with some other people that she wanted to be around.*

P1: :*… if you want to do something positive, it's probably not just going to be with those diagnosed people is it. You want to be actually getting groups of people and creating some kind of discussion groups, or special interest groups or something…*

Theme 2: Practising and reviewing social situations

Parents suggested that their daughters need opportunities to explore social situations and to practice their conversation and interaction skills.

P1: *So I think sometimes sitting down with people and, whether you do it with video clips, or any of those sorts of things, or you take people and you say 'look, what would you have done there?' and do some role play…*

One parent explained that her daughter felt more comfortable in social situations where she felt prepared and would therefore benefit from time to think about how she would respond in different settings and circumstances.

P2: *Yeah I think she probably needs to have more conversation that not everybody's liking her subject that she's talking about and how long to talk about it and when to finish. And how to change what they're talking about… probably need some intervention there.*

Theme 3: Preparation for secondary school

Preparation for the transition from primary to secondary school was identified as an important area of support. Parents suggested that taster days and early introduction to key adults at secondary school were essential to reduce their daughters' anxiety and create a sense of familiarity.

P4: *She had a day here with another girl and they looked around. And they had days from her primary school coming here and looking around as well. So that was a really good start for her, just to be aware of what was going on.*

In response to the pupils' descriptions of learning the social rules of secondary school, a parent proposed that it would be helpful for pupils to receive some support with social skills as part of the transition process, to prepare them for the social expectations of secondary school.

P1: *I think autistic people also need some idea about how… whatever you want to call it… differently wired, conventionally wired people… how that world works… I like the idea of doing it as part of a transition for everybody, rather than 'you've been chosen because you're rubbish at social skills.'*

Theme 4: Early education around difference and diversity

Parents suggested the need for increased awareness across all pupils in regards to diversity and accepting difference in others. Early education in this area was suggested as particularly important, so that pupils enter secondary school with a greater understanding of conditions such as autism.

P2: *I think children need to be made aware of the differences in people, that not everyone's the same.*
P3: *If autism and everything else was talked about in schools from an early age, then as they got to big school they would be more accepting and understanding.*

P4:*… yes there should be more awareness and more… always more social awareness.*

Theme 5: Raise staff awareness

Staff training

A number of parents suggested that there was a need for teachers to receive more training in autism. Some discussed an autism awareness course for parents, which had developed their understanding of the condition; and which they felt would greatly benefit staff.

P1: *I don't think teachers get enough autism awareness in that you'd expect there to be an autistic child in most classes probably…*

P3: *I actually feel the teachers should all be trained in autism, I really do. I don't think there is enough awareness amongst teachers.*

P4: *My husband and I went on a (parenting course). So if that could be condensed into three separate hourly sessions and had gone around schools, I think that would be brilliant…*

Autism champion teacher

One parent suggested that it may be useful for schools to recognise staff members who have a particularly good understanding of how to support male and female pupils with autism; to encourage other staff to seek advice and develop their own knowledge in this area.

P1: *So that's the thing, it's having some experts, champions, whatever you want to call them in the staff room. So being aware of who autistic or potentially autistic children are and then if you're not sure you're dealing with them particularly well at the moment. It's having, rather than a cold piece of paper, having a few people to have a few words with. Because quite often it's just small things, little pointers can make a big difference…*

Theme 6: Opportunities to check in

A safe space

Parents mentioned a safe space in school as important to give their daughter time to relax and feel comfortable. Some suggested that their daughter would benefit

from a quiet area to eat her lunch, as this could be difficult to manage in busier parts of the school.

P5: *... let them have their own room, whether it be somewhere like this. And if they want to go there, let them go there and let them feel that they've got somewhere safe that they can go and eat and they can be themselves. They don't have to put a front on.*

P4: *And I think the X room…has been wonderful… the X room was a place where girls could go, not necessarily to fit in with the others, but that's a sanctuary place they could go.*

A key person

Parents suggested that having a key person to check in with at school could be a helpful way of providing acknowledgement and understanding. Consistent with the pupils' responses, it was suggested that this could be either a pupil, or a staff member with whom there was a sense of trust.

P1: *I'm sure a key person is really helpful, who they really do trust. And it doesn't really matter who it is, a teacher, or a student, or a support person or whoever. But the relationship's got to work and they've got to trust that person.*

P1: *Sophia always tells me off for trying to fix things and actually just understanding is much more helpful in many ways, rather than trying to do something about it.*

P5: *Yeah Zara's got a mentor… she finds that really, really helpful. She really enjoys that.*

9.4 Research Question 2b: What support and provision is needed to address the challenges identified by adolescent females with autism in mainstream school from the perspective of school staff?

Seven main themes emerged from staff focus groups regarding their views on the support and provision needed to address the social challenges experienced by female pupils with autism. These are displayed in the following table.

Themes
Individualised support
Discrete social intervention
Education around difference and diversity
Staff collaboration
Checking in
Home- school collaboration
Early intervention

Table 12. Final themes and sub-themes for phase two research question 2b

Theme 1: Individualised support

Staff emphasised the need to treat each pupil as an individual and to avoid an umbrella approach to supporting with pupils with autism. One focus group discussed the importance of pupils and staff working together to identify and develop supportive strategies; keeping the pupil at the centre.

S1-T: *I think that's part of the belonging isn't it, that they actually come up with strategies that fit them. So with Zara her little kind of go to thing is to step outside the classroom…*

S1-S: *… and it's accepting that somebody with autism isn't going to be the same as somebody else. Because they are different people with different characteristics.*

S1-T: *But if one strategy works for one, it might not work for another. And I think it's just that awareness.*

Pupils in phase one commented on specific examples where they had had a say in the support that was put in place. For example, Zara described the Power point presentation that had been used to help her tutor group understand autism; an idea which her and the SENCo had agreed and discussed together.

Theme 2: Discrete social intervention

It was proposed that social intervention for adolescent females with autism needs to be subtle in order to avoid setting them apart from peers. One member of staff identified a need to check in with pupils and to allow for unplanned conversation to support them with social challenges as they happen.

S1-AH: *The older they get, it's a bit more subtle in terms of the intervention shall we say and how you help them with their identity and relationships.*

S3-TA: *But sometimes these conversations, they're not planned, they just… they happen and they come up and find us because they're upset or their feeling low or their self-esteem's at rock bottom.*

It was also suggested that the pupils could benefit from staff discretely structuring social opportunities to support with peer interaction and making friends.

S2-AT: *I think it's about helping structure the possibility, without putting any pressure on … You just kind of put a few things in place to make it a little bit easier.*

This suggestion reflects the views of the pupils in phase one, who emphasised their wish to avoid drawing attention to themselves. It also reflects the suggestion of parents to provide social opportunities that are not enforced or obviously supporting with social skills.

Theme 3: Education around difference and diversity

While parents acknowledged a need to develop pupils' understanding of difference and diversity, staff elaborated on this and suggested a need to develop awareness at a whole school level. It was suggested that incorporating this in to the school ethos would be key in regards to promoting peer acceptance and understanding of autism.

S3-TA: *I think it must have to come from the school, from tutors I guess and it's got to be ingrained somehow into the community that this is acceptable. You know, everybody is different and we need to make allowances for each other.*

S1-AH: *I think it's something that we could certainly look at though, in terms of the wider body of the school, of the students. Because yes, it's about working with the individual with ASD, but it's also the rest of the year group, so they understand.*

Theme 4: Staff collaboration

It was suggested that staff need to work together to provide the most consistent and effective support for female pupils with autism. One school discussed the importance of staff sharing their knowledge and understanding of this area.

S1-AH: *It's not just about the SEND team, it's about everyone. It's about everything we do as a school being consistent, which helps not only the kids with social communication difficulties, but those who are labelled as shy, introverted.*

S2-AT: *The Head of Year, he's been really good. Takes the time to come over and asks, like if something's going wrong, will take advice about how best to tackle that situation, rather than ploughing straight in as you might with your sanction system or whatever … and coming to get that advice.*

This reflects the suggestion from one of the parents to appoint an autism champion within the staff team, as a way of disseminating knowledge and ideas for support. It also takes into account the pupils' concerns about the level of staff awareness and understanding regarding their autism.

Theme 5: Checking in

As suggested by pupils and parents, staff commented on the need for a safe base in school, where pupils could have time away from busier environments. Staff also identified a need for access to key adults who the pupils could check in with and to support with their social and emotional well-being. One school mentioned mentoring as an effective way of providing this.

S3-TA: *I do think a safe place and an adult; somebody who they can go to, to talk to. Having that kind of little bit of 1:1, whether it's 15 minutes a week just to touch base with you and say 'How is it going?'*

S1-TA: *And the mentoring as well I think is quite important.*

Theme 6: Home- school collaboration

It was suggested that close communication between home and school was of high importance in regards to providing consistent support for female pupils with autism. One member of staff explained that school had needed to support some parents to allow their daughter to have more social independence to prepare her for later life.

S1-S: *I think relationships with parents… you've got to have a positive relationship with parents, otherwise you just won't go anywhere.*

S2-TA 2: *I think that takes a lot for a parent to… you know, push themselves out of their comfort zone…*

This reflected the views of parents who valued having a positive relationship and regular communication with the school SENCo. Parent responses also indicated a desire for an increase in the level of communication between staff regarding their daughter's needs.

Theme 7: Early intervention

It was proposed that early intervention and support was essential in order to promote the well-being of adolescent females with autism. Staff suggested that a number of pupils had started to receive support in secondary school, which was often too late.

S3-S: *I think getting in early, that would be the big thing for me…I think if you can pick them up at an early stage, you can work with them so that they get that sense of belonging.*

S1-AH: *… of course, by the time you've kind of got there, they're at the end of the road and then they're off to the next place and actually they needed the intervention a lot lower down.*

The importance of identifying and supporting needs at an early stage was also emphasised by parents. Both staff and parents suggested that the transition to secondary school was particularly challenging for girls with autism when their needs were not fully recognised and they did not have a diagnosis.

Likewise, pupils in phase one described their experiences of having to learn and apply a new set of social rules when they began secondary school; suggesting that the preparation they received in primary school was not always adequate.

10. Phase Two Discussion

The following discussion will be structured according to the phase two research questions. The findings outlined in the previous section will be considered in relation to the existing research and literature. The themes that emerged from staff and parent responses for each question are combined and discussed in conjunction to allow for comparison of their similarities and differences.

10.1 Parent and staff views regarding the social challenges for adolescent females with autism in mainstream school

School environment

Both parents and staff mentioned aspects of the school environment that could present social challenges for female pupils with autism. Unstructured periods such as break and lunch time were identified as socially overwhelming, as found in previous research obtaining the views of parents and teachers of females with autism (Moyse & Porter, 2015). Parents more often made reference to the risk of their daughters' difficulties "going overlooked" and "getting lost" in the busy and fast-moving environment of a secondary school. This reflects the views of the pupils in phase one and is also supported by the literature (Attwood, 2007; Dworzynski et al., 2012; May, 2013). Staff more often considered the environment of the classroom and the importance of seating pupils in a way that minimised their social anxiety, allowing them to "relax and… focus". This was recognised by a pupil in phase one, who appreciated her teacher consistently seating her by the wall where she felt most comfortable.

Delayed development

One theme that emerged specifically from parent responses was around the delayed development of some females with autism in comparison to their peers. Three parents discussed the interests of their daughters, which were more typically associated with younger children and that this could "alienate" them from their peers. Parents interviewed in the research of Calder et al. (2013) also

reported that their child's developmental differences and level of maturity impacted on their social interactions and ability to make friends. However, a parent in the current research reported that when her daughter learned that her interest was not age-appropriate, she realised that "she shouldn't mention" it. This highlights the ability of some females with autism to mask their developmental differences where possible.

Society: perceptions and expectations

Social norms and expectations were mentioned by parents and staff as impacting on the school experiences of female pupils with autism. Both staff and parents discussed the pupils' desire to be considered and treated as "normal". It was suggested that this could result in pupils "wanting to get rid of their diagnosis" and distancing themselves from their autism, as found in previous research with autistic adolescents (Baines, 2012). Staff described the difficulty of many females with autism in developing a positive identity and feeling "not quite sure… or comfortable about themselves at all." Managing the expectations of "typical" female behaviour was also identified as a social pressure. Similarly, a parent discussed the pressure her daughter felt to "hide who she is to be able to fit in better". This supports MacLeod, Lewis and Robertson's (2013) suggestion for the need to promote a positive view of the autistic identity to enable autistic individuals to develop a more positive self-perception. Furthermore, the current findings could suggest a need to promote a positive female autistic identity, particularly as staff identified more acceptance of unusual behaviour in autistic males compared to females. The majority of participants discussed self-esteem, but parents made particular reference to academic pressure and fear of failure, which could be associated with expectations regarding female achievement and behaviour (Myhill & Jones, 2006). This point was not raised by staff, consistent with the suggestion that females' anxieties around learning are not so apparent in school and easily missed, as proposed by Wagner (2006).

Staff commented particularly on some pupils' use of online social media to find a friend they could relate to and expressed concerns about their vulnerability within today's society. Parents tended to discuss the positive aspects of social media and

technology, which they saw as developing their daughters' social connectivity and peer relationships; as suggested by recent research with adolescent females (Levine & Stekel, 2016). It could be argued that social media provides females with autism with a more visual and less intimidating means of communication, which allows them to stay connected with friends, while giving them time to plan and review their responses.

Friendships and peer interactions

Staff and parents commented on the difficulties of females with autism in regards to initiating and sustaining reciprocal conversations with their peers. Both suggested that a key issue was contributing either too much or too little to conversation, which could result in peers disengaging with them. As illustrated by the phase one findings, it was suggested that the pupils sometimes perceive that peers are not listening to them and have difficulty recognising how their behaviour is affecting the interaction.

As found in prior research (Calder et al., 2013, Dean et al., 2014) female pupils were perceived by many staff and parents as being "on the outside looking in", rather than being fully involved in social groups. Three parents discussed instances where their daughter had been excluded or ignored by peers, with one explaining that "people will talk and then sort of turn around and ignore her". Few staff members reported incidents of exclusion, but staff in two focus groups suggested that some females perceived themselves as outsiders and would look for evidence to "prove what they think of themselves". Nichols et al. (2009) discuss the difficulties that females with autism may experience with self-esteem and the need to support their development of a positive self-perception. The current findings also complement the work of Harter, Waters and Whitesell (1998), who found that adolescents' self-perceptions about friendships were highly related to self-esteem. Once again, this highlights the potential for perceived social competence to impact on the mental health and well-being of adolescent females with autism.

In line with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), staff suggested that perceived membership in a social group tended to promote a sense of belonging for female pupils with autism. However, staff and parents also emphasised the females' desire for "one best friend", which was often their priority. Parents commented specifically on the difficulty that their daughter experienced with managing the social rules and "invisible demands" of female friendships, which echoes the findings of Cridland et al. (2014), who also interviewed the mothers of females with autism. Many parents referred to the level of verbal interaction presenting challenges, along with managing social conflict, referred to by other authors as relational aggression (Nichols et al., 2009; Sedgewick et al., 2016). However one parent discussed her daughter's experience of having two friends who disliked each other, but both wanted her as a friend. This reflects the findings of phase one that females with autism do form successful friendships.

Adults' influence

Both parents and staff considered the influence of adults in regards to the social experiences of adolescent females with autism. There was general agreement that teachers' understanding of autism in females required some development, as suggested by the literature (Moyse & Porter, 2015). A number of parents suggested that anxiety was often mistaken for rudeness by teachers, which could affect their daughter's relationship with the teacher, as well as her engagement. One parent explained that her daughter could seem "very rude because she's desperate to get out of the situation." Within the staff focus groups, it was suggested that parent anxieties could also affect the social experiences of females with autism. One SENCo discussed the difficulty of some parents in allowing their daughter with autism to gain more social independence. It was suggested that some parents worried about their daughter's social vulnerability both in and outside of school. An Advisory Teacher described the experience of supporting a parent to "push herself out of her comfort zone" by allowing her daughter to go to the cinema with a peer. To my knowledge there is relatively little research into the anxiety of the parents of females with autism. However, a doctoral thesis by Watson (2014) identified the significant level of stress experienced by the parents of females with high-functioning autism, with delayed or misdiagnosis being a

contributing factor. It may be interesting for future research to further explore the concerns and anxieties of the parents of females with autism; particularly in relation to their daughter's social competence.

10.2 Parent and staff views in regards to the support and provision that is needed to address the challenges identified by adolescent females with autism in mainstream school

Creating social opportunities

Parents and staff were in agreeance that adolescent females with autism may benefit from semi-structured opportunities in school to socialise and make friends. One parent suggested that her daughter was interested in extra-curricular activities, but "was not confident enough to be able to… access some of those things" without encouragement and an invitation to take part. "Discussion groups or special interest groups" were suggested as a way of providing a guide for conversation and finding common interests with peers. Similarly, Calder et al. (2013) found that parents reported that they saw it as important to provide access to activities and clubs to support the social interaction and friendships of their child with autism. Staff in the current research also commented that "the older they get, it's a bit more subtle in terms of the intervention" to support with social and emotional well-being. One staff focus group suggested that the majority of social intervention was "not planned" and took place in the form of conversations at appropriate points in the school day, or when the pupils are "feeling low or their self-esteem's at rock bottom". For some females this involved staff facilitating discussion between pupils during unstructured times. Others were reported to benefit from talking through social interactions to prepare for or reflect on them. The current findings identify the importance of social interventions that adolescents with autism view as acceptable and that target skills that are important to them, as proposed by McDonald and Machalicek (2013).

Early intervention and preparation for secondary school

Staff suggested that early identification of needs and diagnosis was essential to optimise the social experiences of females with autism, as advocated by the literature in this area (Halladay et al., 2015; Nichols et al., 2009; Wilkinson, 2008). One member of staff proposed that their female pupils with autism had experienced greater mental health difficulties throughout secondary school, the later their needs were identified; and that "they needed the intervention a lot lower down". This is supported by evidence of females with undiagnosed autism presenting with anxiety and mood disturbances (Kopp, Kelly & Gillberg, 2010). Additionally, parents suggested that support with the transition from primary to secondary school was key; particularly with the social aspects of secondary school. They saw practising and reviewing conversations and social situations as important to making their daughter's social experiences more successful. One parent suggested that her daughter needed support to understand when it was appropriate to talk about her specialist interests; in particular, "how long to talk about it and when to finish." Social skills programmes aimed specifically at females with autism are limited (Gould & Ashton-Smith, 2011). To address this, Jamison and Schuttler (2017) developed the "Girls Night Out" programme, which is a social skills and self-care curriculum for adolescent females with autism. Based on evaluation data over 4 years, the authors propose that the programme led to significant improvements in the perceived social competence, self-perception and quality of life of adolescent females with autism. The current findings support the need for programmes of this nature, particularly as females with autism enter secondary school.

Education around difference and diversity

Parents and staff identified a need for children and young people to have an increased understanding and acceptance of difference and diversity. Parents emphasised the need for autism to be "talked about in schools from an early age". Likewise, staff suggested that it was important for schools to adopt an ethos that welcomes diversity and an acceptance that "everybody is different." Campbell (2006) suggests that peer stigmatisation of pupils with autism may be reduced

through descriptive information, which highlights similarities between pupils with autism and their peers; explanatory information, which emphasises the lack of control pupils have over their symptoms; and directive information, which suggests how to interact with pupils with autism. Furthermore, Ranson and Byrne (2014) found that adolescent females who accessed an eight week anti-stigma programme showed an increase in knowledge and positive attitudes towards peers with high functioning autism. It was however noted by parents and staff in the current study that any peer intervention would need to be planned and delivered carefully, to avoid negative reactions from peers.

Awareness, understanding and collaboration

Parents suggested that it would be beneficial for school staff to receive additional training in understanding and supporting pupils with autism. One parent mentioned particular staff members who understood her daughter's needs and had good autism awareness. She suggested an "autism champion" teacher may be an effective way of developing the knowledge and understanding of the wider staff team. Recent guidance also advocates that schools should develop staff awareness of the indicators of autism in females, to enable earlier intervention (Nasen, 2016). Staff focused more on the need to treat each pupil as an individual and to be aware that "if one strategy works for one, it might not work for another." Staff also commented on the need for a collaborative approach to supporting females with autism. One focus group discussed the importance of teachers seeking support and "coming to get that advice" from specialist TAs and teachers who have a high level of knowledge regarding autism in females. Staff also discussed the need to establish "positive relationships with parents" of females with autism, to increase collaboration and consistency between home and school.

Opportunities to check in

Parents commented on the importance of their daughters having access to a safe space in school where they can be themselves and where "they don't have to put a front on." Staff and parents identified regular opportunities to "touch base" with a

trusted member of staff as important for well-being. The research of Hill (2014) highlights the need for a "sanctuary" in school as a protective factor for adolescent pupils with autism. Participants in this study also indicated that regular sessions with teaching assistants allowed them to express any concerns they had. This is consistent with the pupil views obtained in phase one of the current research. The pupils also made it clear that they liked to spend time with their friends, but needed occasional breaks in a quieter environment.

11. Overall Discussion

Phase one of this study represents the social experiences of eight adolescent females with autism in mainstream school, with a focus on their sense of belonging. In phase two, the school staff and parents of these pupils shared their views on the social challenges for adolescent females with autism in mainstream school. Based on the challenges discussed by the pupils in phase one, parents and school staff also expressed their views on the support and provision required to enhance the social experiences of adolescent females with autism. The following section will consider the overall findings and implications of the research.

11.1 The social experiences of adolescent females with autism in mainstream school

Thematic analysis of the data in phase one suggested that the factors impacting on participants' sense of belonging in school included: reciprocal friendships; safety; encouragement and inclusion; talking things through; feeling understood; and meeting social expectations. The following factors were found to contribute to participants' feelings of exclusion: being on the periphery; feeling de-valued; limited understanding and awareness of autism; desire for identification; stigma around difference and difficulty; and social skills.

The current research suggests that the concept of belonging is both relevant and useful in regards to understanding the school experiences of adolescent females with autism. In line with the literature, participants associated a sense of belonging with greater enjoyment of school. Pupil responses suggested that feeling connected to peers at school made them happier and more comfortable during the school day. For some pupils, this also increased their motivation to attend, supporting findings that social isolation can impact the likelihood of school drop-out (Dupéré, Leventhal, Dion, Crosnoe, Archambault & Janosz, 2015; Havik, Bru & Ertesvåg, 2015). As proposed by Goodenow (1993), the findings highlight adolescence as a period where the need to belong is particularly prominent. Participants suggested that finding a likeminded peer who offered

understanding and who they could relate to was a priority. The findings also support Juvonen's (2006) proposal that a sense of belonging in school is affected by pupils' relationships with their teachers as well as their peers. Participants commented on the teachers who understood them and how to make them feel more comfortable within the classroom environment. The extent to which participants felt understood by peers was also a significant factor which impacted on their sense of belonging and overall experience of school. For some, finding a peer who shared or related to their own experiences was a key part of this and addressed their desire to identify with other young people. There were participants who described friends who understood what it was like to have autism, or to experience anxiety; and the benefits of being able to talk this through. Others noted the lack of peers who they could identify with and the way in which this contributed to them feeling excluded and unhappy in school. This is consistent with Jetten et al's (2014) suggestion that group membership, or shared identity promotes coping strategies and well-being. However, the participants in the current study did not necessarily want to attain group membership in a large social group. For some, this was a stressful prospect and identifying with one individual or a small group was more desirable.

These findings offer some support to the Hagerty et al. (1992) model of belonging which proposes two dimensions of belonging: "valued involvement" (the experience of feeling, valued, needed and accepted) and "fit" (the person's perception that their characteristics articulate with or complement those of others in the environment). Participants' responses suggested that their experiences of feeling valued and accepted had a significant impact on the extent to which they felt involved and included; and made them feel less socially vulnerable within the school environment. Participants shared examples of how particular friends acknowledged them and included them in conversations or activities. One pupil summarised this as "wanting to be there and feeling that people want you to be there". For some pupils, the experience of valued involvement came through individual interactions. Experiences such as working with a partner, going for a walk with a friend or discovering a shared interest with someone tended to increase the pupils' sense of belonging. The sense of belonging which can be derived through 1:1 relationships is not referred to by the Hagerty et al model (1992), which places emphasises on the sense of belonging that comes from being

part of a system or group. This suggests that the model may need to be refined when it is applied to adolescent females with autism.

In regards to the dimension of "fit" in the Hagerty et al model, some participants spoke positively about shared interests and humour with a key friend. This is consistent with the notion of fitting in with others in the school environment. However, pupils also expressed a need to adapt their behaviour in order to fit in, suggesting they were sometimes unable to be themselves. A number of participants expressed a desire for identification with others and suggested that their autism could be a barrier to this. Furthermore, some participants explained that they attempted to hide their autism in order to appear more "normal". Responses suggested that the participants were conscious of a stereotypical view of autism affecting the expectations and treatment they receive from peers and adults. Participants suggested that staff and peers would sometimes expect externalising, disruptive and aggressive behaviour when they became aware of their autism. This could suggest that there is relatively limited understanding of autism as a spectrum; and that broad assumptions about autism can cause young people to dissociate themselves from their diagnosis.

Whilst the dimensions of "valued involvement" and "fit" are present in the participants' experiences of belonging and exclusion, some additional factors were also significant. A number of participants spoke about the importance of feeling understood and the impact that this had on their relationships with peers and staff. This is not mentioned specifically by the Hagerty et al. (1992) model, but may be particularly relevant to the way adolescent females with autism experience a sense of belonging. This would also support the literature calling for a need to develop the current understanding around autism in females (Wilkinson, 2008; Gould & Ashton-Smith, 2011; Moyse & Porter, 2015). Furthermore, the current findings suggest that adolescent females with autism are very aware of their minority status and the higher proportion of males with an autism diagnosis, compared to females. Whilst they expressed a desire for understanding and acceptance from others, these females with autism also felt a significant pressure to minimise their differences. This suggests that support for adolescent females with autism needs to consider this balance. There is a need to increase awareness of autism in females, whilst ensuring that this does not result in them standing out or feeling more different from their peers.

The theme of safety was another aspect of belonging identified by the current participants, but which does not appear in the Hagerty et al. (1992) model. Baumeister and Leary (1995) consider sense of belonging as a basic human need, which reflects the accounts of the current participants. Similarly, Goodenow (1993) suggests that an important aspect of belonging is the extent to which pupils feel supported by others within the school environment. This was particularly relevant for the pupils in the current study, who considered support from their friends as key to their enjoyment of school.

Overall, the current findings would therefore suggest that a sense of belonging in school is an important concept to explore when considering how to promote the mental health of adolescent females with autism. The findings offer some support to the Hagerty et al (1992) model of belonging in that the dimensions of valued involvement and fit relate to a number of the themes that emerged from the pupil interviews. However, there were some additional factors that were relevant to the sense of belonging and exclusion experienced by the participants. In particular, feeling understood and feeling a sense of safety and support were factors that are not featured in the Hagerty et al (1992) model, but which were identified as important in regards to the extent to which the pupils felt a sense of belonging within the school environment. This suggests that it may be necessary to consider these additional factors when exploring this concept for females with autism in future research. Additionally, the findings suggest that for this population, a sense of belonging is not necessarily derived from membership of a larger group and that it may be more likely to develop within smaller, manageable social environments.

It seems important to draw attention to the extent to which the findings from phase one reflect the views and experiences of the wider population of adolescent females. Research suggests that compared to males, females tend to place higher importance on social connectedness and group membership (Brown & Lohr, 1987; Gilligan, 1987). The pupils in the current study saw friendship as particularly important for their well-being and enjoyment of school. This provides further support for research findings that the social motivation of females with autism is similar to that of females without autism (Sedgewick et al., 2016).

Additionally, the importance that the current participants placed on identification with peers and the need to fit in with others reflects the priorities of many young people during adolescence (Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Goodenow, 1993). Nevertheless, it is important to recognise the cumulative risk factors in regards to the psychological well-being of females with autism. As females, this population are at higher risk for internalising symptoms (Solomon et al., 2012). Additional factors such as limited peer acceptance and social interaction, along with social impairment as a feature of autism can result in adolescent females with autism experiencing what Jamison and Schuttler (2017, p.111) describe as a "double whammy". The current findings suggest that peer relationships can have a significant impact on the mental health of adolescent females with autism. Raising awareness of the unique challenges of females with autism is key in order to reduce the extent to which they are flying under the radar (Dworzynski et al., 2012).

11.2 Social challenges for adolescent females with autism: pupil, parent and staff perspectives

The two phases of this research highlighted particular social challenges experienced by adolescent females with autism, firstly from the perspectives of the pupils themselves and secondly from the perspectives of parents and staff.

Pupil, parent and staff responses suggested that particular aspects of the school social environment such as the potential for large crowds and high levels of noise could evoke anxiety for some females with autism. Likewise, the set-up of the classroom and seating arrangement was identified as a key factor impacting on pupils' self-consciousness and feelings of tension. Such insights into the external factors affecting the mental health of females with autism are of high importance, particularly as these can be difficult to detect (Nichols et al., 2009). It was suggested that the discomfort and anxiety experienced by females with autism in the school environment could be easily missed due to their ability to hide their difficulties.

As mentioned by the pupils themselves in phase one, parents and staff commented on the females' attempts to mask their autism and hide their true self. Pesonen et al. (2015) also describe the experiences of two females with autism who felt a pressure to "pretend to be normal", which is suggested to have affected their mental well-being during their school years. As well as pressure to be normal, some parents commented on their daughter's fear of academic failure and reluctance to ask for help. Parents and staff suggested that the stress and energy of constantly attempting to fit in and avoid social mishaps could result in high levels of anxiety for females with autism.

In comparison, pupil responses indicated that there was less pressure to adapt to the expectations of others during time spent with close friends, or in settings where pupils felt safe and welcome. For some, this meant that they felt more able to talk about their interests, while other responses suggested that they simply felt more able to have a comfortable silence. Pupils and parents suggested that finding likeminded friends online provided opportunities to talk to others about key interests and to feel a sense of identification with others. The findings highlight the need to consider how schools can support the self-esteem of females with autism and how to offer, but not enforce social opportunities.

The pressure that the pupils felt to hide their autism from their wider peer group could suggest that society's current perception of autism carries a degree of stigma. This is supported by research findings that children and adults express more negative attitudes and behavioural intentions towards individuals who exhibit symptoms of autism (Campbell, 2006; Butler & Gillis, 2011). However, it could be that this stigma is intensified for females with autism due to society's expectations of females. Parents and staff suggested that the behaviour exhibited by some females with autism was not considered "normal" for females. Examples included females not taking pride in their appearance and not possessing the conversation skills and knowledge of social rules that may be expected from most adolescent females. In comparison to the phase one findings, many pupils expressed a wish to fit in with others, however there were some who wanted to set themselves apart from those who they described as "girly girls". This could suggest that some female pupils with autism choose to distance themselves from

the stereotypical female image in order to reduce the extent to which they must take on a role, or hide who they are.

Faherty (2006) proposes that society's behavioural and social expectations of females can mean that women and girls with autism experience a different set of social challenges to their male counter parts. This is supported by the views of staff in the current study that males who exhibit unusual social behaviour are considered 'quirky' by their peers, while females showing the same behaviours are considered odd and more likely to be rejected. This could suggest that autistic behaviour is considered more acceptable in males or is seen as typical male behaviour. Furthermore, females are less likely to exhibit autistic behaviours commonly observed in males. It is suggested that this makes them appear to their peers as more personally responsible for their poor social behaviour (Gray, 1993).

There was agreement among pupils, parents and staff regarding the need to increase peer understanding and acceptance of difference and social difficulties. Pupils described some of their peers having limited patience in regards to their difficulties. Parents also noted the challenges that could arise from limited staff awareness of autism in females; particularly in regards to their processing difficulties and their anxious behaviour being mistaken for rudeness. Staff identified the lack of autism related training that they received during their initial teacher training, which made it difficult to know how to recognise or support autistic pupils most effectively. The current findings therefore add to the growing literature calling for more advanced understanding and identification of the needs of females with autism (Nichols, 2009; Cridland et al., 2014; Sedgewick et al., 2016). All three groups of participants also recognised staff who had a higher level of experience and knowledge regarding autism, which highlighted a need to disseminate this knowledge to others as much as possible.

Consistent with the pupils' accounts in phase one, parents and staff noted the motivation of females with autism to form and maintain friendships. They also commented on the challenges that could arise from managing friendships with adolescent females, given the emphasis on social communication skills, empathy and understanding others' perspectives. Parents expressed concerns about how their daughter came across to others and the potential for them to be perceived as

rude or unsociable. Meanwhile, pupils found it difficult to understand why some of their behaviour upset or irritated others. The findings suggest that more explicit teaching of social rules within school may be beneficial in enabling adolescent females with autism to unpick others' behaviour and feelings. Hsiao et al. (2013) propose that as they enter adolescence, the social expectations for females become greater than those for males. As suggested by a number of pupils in phase one, parents and staff pointed out that some females with autism found it easier to manage close friendships with one or two peers, rather than a larger social group. Attwood (2006) suggests that females with high functioning autism often develop one intense friendship with a female peer who will prompt her in social situations and comfort her when she is distressed. This is reflected particularly by the phase one findings of the research, which highlight the importance of key friendships for females with autism.

In summary there were some key points of comparison between the pupil, parent and staff responses. The pupils discussed the social difficulties associated with being autistic and the effect that this had on being accepted. While parents and staff acknowledged this, their responses suggested that the wider social expectations of females could create an even greater challenge for this population. Parents were particularly concerned about how their daughter came across to others, the possibility of her being misunderstood and the impact that is could have on her peer relationships. Some commented on the interests of their daughter being considered unusual and the need to support her not to stand out due to her hygiene and appearance. Staff, on the other hand, expressed concerns about supporting adolescent females with autism with their social vulnerabilities. Pupils were most concerned with making connections with someone who understood them and who they could identify with, rather than developing skills to manage larger group situations. This highlights the need to consider how to prepare females with autism for life beyond education, whilst addressing the pupils' priorities regarding their day to day school experiences.

The findings suggest that a neuro-typical understanding of what constitutes a sense of belonging may not always be helpful when supporting adolescent females with autism. Whilst being accepted and liked by a peer group may be enough to fulfil some young people's need for belonging, this may not always be the case for females with autism. Pupil interviews suggested that being part of a

large social group could actually be a lonely and unenjoyable experience due to the pressure of working out how to behave and interpret the many social interactions taking place. The pupils emphasised their desire for one friendship, or a small group of friends to reduce this social pressure. Those who did spend time with a group of friends also discussed the importance of having some time away to reflect and relax. The findings suggest that schools need to consider how they can support females with autism to have manageable and enjoyable social experiences; and to take account of what the pupils want from these experiences.

11.3 Support and provision needed to enhance the social experiences of females with autism: pupil, parent and staff perspectives

Phase one of this study explored the views of adolescent females with autism in regards to what they feel would support them socially in school. This was developed further in phase two, where the school staff and parents of the pupils discussed the support and provision needed to address the challenges identified by the females with autism in phase one. The following section will discuss the suggestions arising from pupil, parent and staff responses; to provide an overall summary of the support and provision considered necessary to enhance the social experiences of adolescent females with autism in mainstream school.

Social opportunities

Participants in phase one and two emphasised the importance of having opportunities to make social connections with peers. A common suggestion was that adults could support in providing such opportunities, but that any intervention needed to be discrete in order for pupils to feel comfortable with this. This highlights the importance of considering how to support the friendships of pupils with autism in a way that is consistent with their wishes, as proposed by Calder et al. (2013). One pupil proposed that teachers could help by seating or grouping her with likeminded peers who could potentially become friends. Similarly, a parent suggested that extra-curricular group projects or activities may provide semi-structured social opportunities which create less anxiety due to the consistency and predictability they offer. Physical activities and hobbies related to music and

art are suggested as a good way of helping individuals with autism to become involved in small, manageable group activities where there is less pressure around conversation (Muller et al., 2008). By inviting pupils to regular, informal and non-threatening activity sessions, secondary schools could provide females with autism with opportunities to form peer relationships and practise their social skills in a safe environment. These opportunities could also be offered to females who experience social difficulties, but do not have a diagnosis of autism; to support those who are flying under the radar (Dworzynski et al., 2012).

Early intervention

Pupils in phase one recalled their experiences of limited support with social skills in primary school. One pupil explained that she attempted to develop her own understanding of social norms and expectations when she entered secondary school, using the social narratives provided by teen fiction and films. Parents and staff also commented on the need for early intervention in regards to social and emotional well-being for females with autism. Support with transition from primary to secondary school was noted as particularly important by parents. The current findings once again highlight the need to provide females on the autistic spectrum with social and emotional intervention at an early stage, particularly given the potential for late diagnosis to negatively impact on their mental health (Kopp et al., 2010). Within the literature it is suggested that the difficulties of females with autism are likely to become more apparent during adolescence when there is an increased emphasis on relationships, interaction and emotions (Hannah & Murachver, 1999). It would therefore seem imperative that primary school staff become more aware of the early signs of autism in females and are able to prepare them for potential challenges during adolescence.

Awareness and understanding

Whilst some pupils expressed a desire to hide their autism, there were also suggestions as to how awareness and understanding of the condition could be developed. Pupils placed particular emphasis on increasing the level of

understanding among their peers. Research suggests that autism anti-stigma programmes can have a positive effect on peer attitudes and understanding (Ranson & Byrne, 2014). This could be an important area for schools to consider if they are to promote their pupils' sense of belonging to the school environment. However, the findings also suggest a need for wider autism awareness. Parents and staff commented on the need to increase awareness regarding autism in females at a whole school and community level. Similarly, Jamison and Schuttler (2017) highlight the need to include and support females with autism in various community contexts to promote acceptance and appreciation of differences. The importance of staff training in this area was also identified as essential by parents in the current study. Meanwhile, staff suggested a need to share knowledge and good practice regarding support for females with autism. This illustrates the importance of further research in this area in order to enable schools to support females with autism most effectively.

Checking in

As discussed, safe spaces in school were identified by pupils as important in regards to locating friends and checking in with key individuals. Staff and parents commented on the benefits of assigning females with autism a key member of staff to check in with to discuss any social or emotional difficulties. Opportunities to talk through problems were identified as key by participants across phase one and phase two of the research. This once again illustrates an important distinction between the social behaviour commonly exhibited by females, compared to males with autism (Sedgewick et al., 2016). A common suggestion throughout the study was that preparation for upcoming social events or interactions is a key factor in reducing anxiety for adolescent females with autism. The findings suggest that regular opportunities to meet with a trusted adult or mentor could allow pupils to prepare for and feel more confident in managing any potential challenges that arise during the school day.

11.4 Limitations

This study represents a small sample of adolescent females with autism, their parents and school staff. Further replication is needed before the findings can be generalised to other females with autism in mainstream school. The pupils each had a diagnosis of autism, but while some were very high functioning, others were lower functioning. Furthermore, the age range of the pupils ranged from age 12 to age17. Future research may therefore need to include a more homogenous sample.

In regards to the participants in phase two, it should be noted that all parents were mothers and the majority of school staff were female, which may have influenced the data. As the participants self-selected, it was not possible in the current research to obtain the views of the fathers of females with autism, as well as male members of school staff. Additionally, the parents and staff who chose to take part in the research may have held particularly strong views or a high level of knowledge in this area, which could create some bias within the data.

Having reflected on my role as a researcher during the process, I am aware that my interpretation of the data is likely to have been influenced by my own constructions of belonging and exclusion and my experiences of supporting female pupils with autism. However, this is the nature of constructionist research, which acknowledges that the construction of all knowledge is, to some extent, affected by individual beliefs and values.

In phase one of the current research, it is possible that the pupils' accounts of their social experiences in school did not accurately reflect their real life experiences. Pupils may have wanted to give the impression that they had more friends than they really did, or misinterpreted others' behaviour as rejection or bullying. One way of addressing this would have been to carry out observations of the pupils during the school day and to compare this data to their interview responses. However, the aim of the current research was to explore the pupils' psychological construct of belonging, rather than behavioural indicators of belonging. Furthermore, given that females with autism are adept at blending in with others and staying in close physical proximity to their peers, observations may not have

been very useful in capturing the extent to which the pupils felt a sense of belonging.

It may have been possible to conduct a more in-depth exploration of the social experiences of adolescent females with autism by seeking the views of their neuro-typical female peers in phase two. This could have provided more insight into how female pupils with autism are perceived by others in school. However, there are some possible problems regarding the ethics of this approach. Some of the pupils in the current study had chosen not to disclose their autism to their peers. By exploring their peers' attitudes towards autism in females it may be that this would draw attention to their diagnosis against their wishes. Additionally, it was important for the current research to explore the views of parents and staff in phase two, as there had been no prior research into the social experiences of adolescent females with autism to have done so.

It would have been possible to have carried out this research with a group of females with autism, rather than individual interviews. This would have given them the opportunity to meet other females with the same diagnosis and to share their experiences. However, meeting and speaking to a new group of people has the potential to provoke anxiety in adolescent females with autism. This may have impacted on the extent to which they felt comfortable to share their experiences. A group discussion could also mean that the pupils' individual stories became lost. It was important for the current research to capture the voice of each pupil who participated.

11.5 Implications for EP practice

The current study adds to the limited research into the views and experiences of females with autism. The findings have important implications for the practice of EPs, who have a key role in working with schools to provide effective support for pupils with autism. These will now be discussed.

The study illustrates the value of seeking the first hand perspectives of adolescent females with autism in order to gain an insight into their lived experiences. It also

demonstrates that visual supports and practical activities can be an effective way of exploring how females with autism view the world. Phase two of the study showed how the views of females with autism can be used as a basis for developing the support and provision available to them in school. Person centred practices within educational psychology are advocated by the literature (White & Rae, 2016) as well as by the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Code of Practice (DfE, 2014) and the current study provides further evidence for collaborative approaches which seek the views of pupils, parents and school.

The current findings provide important insights into the factors that impact on the sense of belonging experienced by adolescent females with autism in mainstream school. Governmental guidance for schools suggests that in order to promote the mental health of their pupils, they need to develop a sense of belonging within the school community (DfE, 2015). The findings of this research highlight good practice and areas for development in regards to how schools can support female pupils with autism to form and maintain a sense of belonging. This provides EPs with a good basis from which to develop pieces of systemic work with schools that consider what is working well and what support could be improved.

At a wider level, the findings also identify a need for schools and professionals in education to develop their current understanding of autism in females and to be aware of the early signs and symptoms. The findings demonstrate the need to identify autism in females at an earlier stage in order to support them to develop a positive sense of self and identity. EPs are well placed to deliver training and supervision to school staff in this area. The need to develop peer awareness and understanding of autism in females also emerged from the findings. This is another form of intervention that EPs could support schools with.

11.5.1 Implications regarding support for adolescent females with autism

Drawing on the findings from the two phases of this research, recommendations regarding effective support for adolescent females with autism in mainstream school will now be discussed.

Opportunities to develop social connectedness

The current research suggests that adolescent females with autism may benefit from support to increase their social connectedness through opportunities to meet likeminded individuals. This could take place within the school setting, for example through invitations to small lunchtime or after school groups; relevant to the pupils' strengths and interests. Additionally, this could involve supporting the pupils to develop an interest in a particular career path or leisure activity and considering any relevant social opportunities. Online forums have also been identified as a means through which females with autism can form or maintain friendships with individuals who share their interests or with whom they can identify. Bargiela, Steward & Mandy (2016) found that autistic females who visited online forums for individuals with autism reported that this had helped them to feel accepted, understood and proud of their diagnosis. Schools could play a role in making female pupils with autism and their parents aware of safe and appropriate forums through which to connect with other young people. Another particularly important role for school would be around developing the pupils' awareness of internet safety and appropriate online communication.

For some females with autism, the preference for one best friend and for connection with a key individual, could lead to the development of a romantic or intimate relationship. Schools therefore need to educate the pupils about sex and relationships, as well as areas such as consent, privacy awareness and appropriate touch. Whilst it is important to allow adolescent females with autism to fulfil their desire for connectedness and belonging, schools have a responsibility to develop the pupils' awareness of how to do so safely.

Individualised support with social skills

The current findings also suggest that some adolescent females with autism may require support to navigate the social rules of mainstream school. However, there is a need for intervention to be individualised and in line with the wishes of the pupil. For some pupils it may be that a structured social skills intervention is appropriate to increase their social confidence. Regular sessions that target skills

such as peer entry and exit skills, conversation skills and managing arguments have been found to improve knowledge of social skills amongst adolescents with autism (Laugeson, Frankel, Mogil & Dillon, 2009). However, the current findings suggest that some adolescent females with autism may require social skills interventions to be more discrete in order to avoid emphasising differences to their peers or highlighting their difficulties. It may therefore be that this intervention is delivered more subtly; through opportunities to check in with key adults who support the pupils to discuss and reflect on recent social interactions or to prepare for those which are coming up.

Early intervention and transition support

This research highlighted transition from primary to secondary school as having a significant impact on the school experiences of adolescent females with autism. The findings suggest that this population require a high level of preparation for the social aspects of secondary school; firstly due to the change in the physical environment and also due to the changing social demands that come into play during adolescence. Primary schools have an important role to play in providing transition support for their more socially vulnerable pupils. This could include careful consideration of future tutor groups and small group opportunities through close communication with secondary schools. It could also involve preparing female pupils with autism to start conversation and make friends through simple social scripts and role playing various social scenarios that they may encounter. In order for this to happen effectively, school staff need to be provided with the knowledge and understanding to be able to identify female pupils who may be on the autistic spectrum and require additional support at an early stage. Therefore, it is important for staff to have access to training on how autism presents in females. This should include staff in early years and primary settings, as well as secondary settings in order to promote early intervention and identification.

Inclusion and understanding within the classroom

The current findings suggest that females with autism can require differentiation in the classroom; to enable them to participate fully in class learning and to feel that their needs are understood. Specifically, the findings imply that some female

pupils with autism may have some difficulty with auditory processing, which impacts on their ability to understand and respond to verbal information and instructions. This implies that teaching staff may need to provide visual material to support pupil's understanding; and to enable them to refer back to this information when needed. Pupils may also benefit from teachers checking their understanding in a way that they feel comfortable with. For example, to avoid asking them what they have been asked to do in front of the class and to understand the need for repetition and revisiting key information. To support the well-being of pupils who strive for perfectionism or fear the prospect of failure, it may be beneficial for staff to provide opportunities to re-draft initial ideas and to emphasise the importance of making mistakes during the learning process. The findings also indicate that teachers should try where possible to get to know the strengths and special interests of female pupils with autism; with the view of supporting their self-esteem and their sense of belonging within the classroom.

Developing a positive self-perception

A further implication of this study is in regards to the self-perception of adolescent females with autism and how to support them to feel confident and comfortable with who they are. The findings suggest that females with autism require support to develop their understanding of autism, as well as the strengths, interests and various characteristics that contribute to their identity. This population may benefit from support to manage any pressure to conform to the expectations of a 'normal' female. Female pupils with autism may therefore require encouragement to pursue and develop their personal interests and skills, whether or not these are consistent with female cultural influences. It may also be beneficial to provide female pupils with autism with the opportunity to meet or to become aware of role models who do not necessarily conform to typical gender expectations. To support female pupils with autism to express, rather than internalise their thoughts and feelings about themselves and others, it may also be beneficial for schools to provide mentors; either pupils or staff who they can check in with regularly in school. This could be an opportunity for pupils to take time out from busier or more intense social environments and to help prevent the build-up of exhaustion due to prolonged attempts to mirror and camouflage their difficulties.

11.5.2 Understanding sex differences in autism

The current findings will now be considered in the context of existing hypotheses regarding sex differences in autism.

In line with the Extreme Male Brain theory (Baren-Cohen, 2003), the current findings suggest that adolescent females with autism are socially motivated and may therefore attempt to overcome their difficulties with social communication to gain social acceptance and a sense of belonging. The pupils in phase one expressed a desire for friendship and identification with others. Adhering to social norms and expectations was an important way of building their social connections. This supports the notion that females with autism are less likely to receive a diagnosis of autism due to appearing more socially competent than males with autism. Pupils in the current study also expressed a preference for one, or a small group of key friends rather than a large group. Current diagnostic tools do not consider these characteristics and coping strategies, which once again suggests that females with autism are more likely to be missed.

The current findings also offer support to the proposal that the expression of autism in females is significantly influenced by their stage of development. The findings across both phases of this research suggest that adolescence is a particularly challenging period for females with autism due to the social demands that emerge at this time. It may be that because autism symptoms are more apparent in females at this later stage, they are likely to receive a diagnosis later than males. The transition from primary to secondary school was identified as a particularly significant event for females with autism. Some pupils felt unprepared for the busy social environment and the need to learn complex and hidden social rules that underlie female friendships and their interactions. The findings also suggest that during adolescence, females with autism become more aware of whether their hobbies and interests are age appropriate. For some pupils, this meant having to learn when they should and should not talk about their interests in front of others. This again highlights the tendency of females with autism to adapt their behaviour to the situation. It also indicates that adolescence is a period during which females with autism are under significant pressure to fit in with

others. The findings suggest that this may result in pupils being unable to be themselves. Therefore, it is important that schools are aware of the social difficulties that can arise for females with autism during adolescence; and the preventative intervention that may be needed before, during and following transition to secondary school.

The findings offer support to the literature suggesting that females with autism are able to camouflage their difficulties and to come across as socially competent. The pupils themselves discussed the importance of not drawing attention to themselves and their wish to be treated and perceived as 'normal'. The accounts of the parents in phase two indicated that they had a desire to support their daughters to build friendships, but were also aware of the need to step back during their teenage years. This could indicate that the parents of females with autism are likely to encourage and expect them to be socially competent due to their sex; therefore supporting and setting up social opportunities during their childhood years. During adolescence, it may be that females with autism no longer have this level of support, making their symptoms more apparent. Camouflaging their difficulties appears to be one way of coping with the social demands of adolescence.

The findings also highlighted instances where female pupils with autism felt less pressure to camouflage. For some pupils, this happened during their time spent with individuals at school who accepted and understood them. Others expressed a desire for this, but did not feel comfortable enough to be themselves due to the risk of being rejected. For some pupils, this meant that they chose not to disclose their diagnosis to peers and distanced themselves from the label as much as possible. The findings suggest that the sense of belonging that adolescent females with autism can gain from mutual friendships in school may impact on the extent to which they feel the need to camouflage their difficulties. Therefore, enhancing pupils' sense of belonging should remain an important focus for schools; with the awareness that how this is achieved will vary for different individuals.

The current findings suggest that future research should continue to explore the characteristics and strategies that are specific to females with autism. This is particularly important in order to develop diagnostic tools that are more sensitive

to autistic behaviours in females. Furthermore, identifying autism in females at an earlier stage could allow for more preventative intervention to support them when they reach adolescence and must contend with a range of new social challenges. The findings also suggest that it would be useful for future research to further explore the use of camouflaging in females with autism. Specifically, it will be important to investigate whether this social coping strategy is used more or less depending on the pupil's environment, the nature of their social relationships and the extent to which they experience a sense of belonging.

11.6 Future directions for research

Future research could develop the current findings by comparing the ways in which females and males with autism experience a sense of belonging and exclusion within mainstream school. This could provide further information in regards to the diagnostic profile and effective support for males and females with autism. It may also be useful to replicate the current study with adolescent females without a diagnosis of autism to explore extent to which the findings generalise to other females at this stage of development.

Due to time constraints the current research involved data collection during two school terms. Research in the future could explore the sense of belonging experienced by females with autism over a longer time period such as before and after diagnosis, or during the transition from primary to secondary school.

The current study revealed important insights into the impact of societal views and expectations for females with autism. Future research in this area adopting a feminist approach could provide further insights in to the ways in which females with autism are affected by expectations of 'normal' female behaviour; and how a positive identity for females with autism may be developed.

12. Concluding comments

The current study addressed an identified gap in the literature by seeking the first hand views and experiences of adolescent females with autism in mainstream school. Based on the pupils' views, staff and parents considered the support and provision necessary to enhance the social experiences of adolescent females with autism during their school years.

Key themes emerging from pupil, parent and staff responses were around perceived peer acceptance, friendship and social competence. This was suggested to have an important influence on the sense of belonging experienced by adolescent females with autism in mainstream school. Consistent with prior research, the findings suggest that adolescent females with autism are motivated to seek social contact and form friendships in the same way as females without a diagnosis of autism. The findings also highlight the specific social difficulties experienced by females with autism and the way in which this can add to their feelings of exclusion in the school environment. Responses across both phases of the research indicated that there is a stigma associated with the label of autism and with the autistic behaviours exhibited by females. For pupils, disclosure of their autism was seen as risky due to the effect that this could have on how they were seen and treated by others. Furthermore, parent and staff responses indicated that females with autism may attempt to hide who they truly are in order to fit in with society's expectations of adolescent females. This suggests that a sense of belonging for females with autism may be dependent on them adapting their behaviour to please and fit in with their peers.

The stress and energy of constantly attempting to appear 'normal' and mirror the social behaviour of others presents a potential risk to the mental health of adolescent females with autism; particularly if these attempts are unsuccessful. The current findings therefore imply that there is a need to enable females with autism to feel a sense of belonging within society and to feel more comfortable with them-selves. Pupils expressed a desire to be better understood by others and to be able to identify with their peers. This highlights the importance of increasing the awareness, understanding and acceptance of autism in females among peers, school staff and society as a whole. Females with autism continue to contend with

the gender expectations held by society and face the challenge of working out where and who they fit in with.

The current study identifies key areas of support to enable females with autism to form a clearer and more positive sense of identity. The findings suggest that adolescent females with autism require early intervention with social skills and peer relationships. With many females receiving a late diagnosis, or being missed completely, support may come at too late a stage. Whilst the development of the diagnostic process is an important part of this, it is also imperative to address staff awareness of how autism presents in females during the early years and primary school. Furthermore the findings suggest a need to develop the social confidence and self-perception of adolescent females from an early stage; providing them with semi-structured opportunities to practice these skills and to form friendships and social connections.

The current findings highlight the similarities in the desires, motivations and challenges of adolescent females with and without autism. As for many adolescent females, peer relationships play an important part in their well-being and the pressure to fit in and behave in accordance with social norms is extremely apparent. However, it needs to be recognised that while females with autism are motivated to form a sense of belonging within the school environment, this may be fulfilled in a different way than for their neuro-typical peers. This research suggests that a key aspect of belonging for female pupils with autism is the understanding and identification that can come from a close friendship. It does not necessarily require membership in larger peer groups. For some females with autism, being part of a larger group may even diminish their sense of belonging due to the potentially overwhelming social demands that this could bring. The impact of understanding and identification with others is not specifically mentioned in the Hagerty et al (1992) model of belonging. The current findings therefore imply that this model needs to be developed to consider these factors when it is applied to adolescent females with autism. Furthermore, the findings suggest that schools need to avoid a neuro-typical understanding of what constitutes belonging when considering how to provide female pupils with autism with positive social experiences. Any support must be based around the wishes and priorities of the pupils and the social experiences that they want within

school. For some pupils this may involve support to widen their friendship group, whilst for others it may be around scheduling breaks from busier social environments, developing individual friendships or providing social opportunities within a small, manageable and predictable setting.

This is one of the only studies to have obtained the views and experiences of adolescent females with autism in mainstream school, along with their parents and school staff. The findings reveal important insights into the specific social challenges for adolescent females with autism. They also identify areas of good practice and next steps in regards to providing effective support for the social and emotional well-being of adolescent females with autism. This is an important and growing area of research. Future studies are needed to further develop the current findings and add to the literature on females with autism.

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14. Appendices

Appendix 1: Development of phase one interview schedule

Stage 1: Searching the literature for initial themes

Importance and understanding of belonging

Hagerty et al. (1992): The two defining attributes of belonging are "valued involvement" and "fit".

Baumeister and Leary (1995): Lack of belongingness is associated with higher incidence of maladjustment, stress, psychological pathology and health problems.

Calder, Hill and Pellicano (2013): Found considerable variation in autistic pupils' motivation to form and maintain relationships with their peers. Do females with autism have a high need for social contact and acceptance from peers?

Sedgewick et al. (2016): The social motivation and friendship quality of females with autism is similar to that of females without autism.

Goodenow (1993): Females reported a higher sense of school belonging than males.

Brown and Lohr (1987): Adolescent females tend to place more importance on group membership than males.

Fitting in/ identification with others

Halladay et al. (2015): There is a higher proportion of males than females with a diagnosis of autism.

Faherty (2006): Females are affected by autism in some similar ways to males, but are 'doubly challenged by the added assumptions that society places on the female gender.'

Cridland et al. (2014): Participants spoke about the experience of 'being surrounded by males' and tending to get on better with male peers.

Nature of peer relationships

Attwood (2006): Females with autism are more likely than males to be 'mothered' by same gender peers which could be seen as protective of their mental health.

Cridland et al. (2014): Participants discussed the complexity of relationships with female peers and the difficulty of forming friendships with typically developing females.

Holtmann, Bölte and Poustka, (2007): Females with autism were rated as having more social problems than males on the Child Behaviour Checklist.

Attwood (2007): Females are able to mask their difficulties and 'disappear' in large groups.

Social acceptance, exclusion, bullying

Dean et al. (2014): While male pupils with autism were more likely to be overtly socially excluded, females with autism were more often overlooked, rather than rejected.

Pesonen et al. (2015): Mary's account indicates, social support for her was apparent, and she was able to feel belonging at school. Emma explained that her teacher and classmates bullied her: ''Especially during elementary school, there were bullies accordingly."

Relationships and support from school staff

Cridland et al. (2014): Parents spoke about teachers' limited knowledge of autism symptomology in females.

Moyse and Porter (2015): School staff were unable to recognise and support challenges around social rules and expectations for their female pupils with autism.

Pesonen et al. (2015): One participant recounted good relations with her teachers and peers. Emma explained that her teacher and classmates bullied her.

Stage 2: Developing initial themes and questions

Importance and understanding of belonging

-Why is belonging/ social contact important or not?

-Does this vary according to environment?

-What constitutes belonging? >What constitutes friendship/ a friendship group? >What function does friendship/ social contact serve?

-What are the effects of diminished belonging?

Fitting in/ identification with others

-Feelings about diagnosis

-How positive/negative do they feel about their differences?

-Does this vary according to environment?

-What would help them to feel more able to fit in?

-What are their views around being a female with autism? >Would it be different if they were male?

Nature of peer relationships

-What are important qualities for a friend/ friendship?

-Do friends value their strengths and individual attributes?

-What kind of person would they ideally like to be friends with?

-Peer group membership?

-Understanding and forming friendships with other females

-Do they find it easier to form friendships with males? >How do they feel about this?

-How do they think they are perceived by other females?

-What are their experiences around verbal communication and high levels of intimacy in female friendships?

Social acceptance and exclusion/bullying

-Setting: > In school > Via social media

-What helps them to feel more included?

-What constitutes bullying/ exclusion?

-What constitutes inclusion? > How would you know if you were part of the group?

Relationships and support from school staff

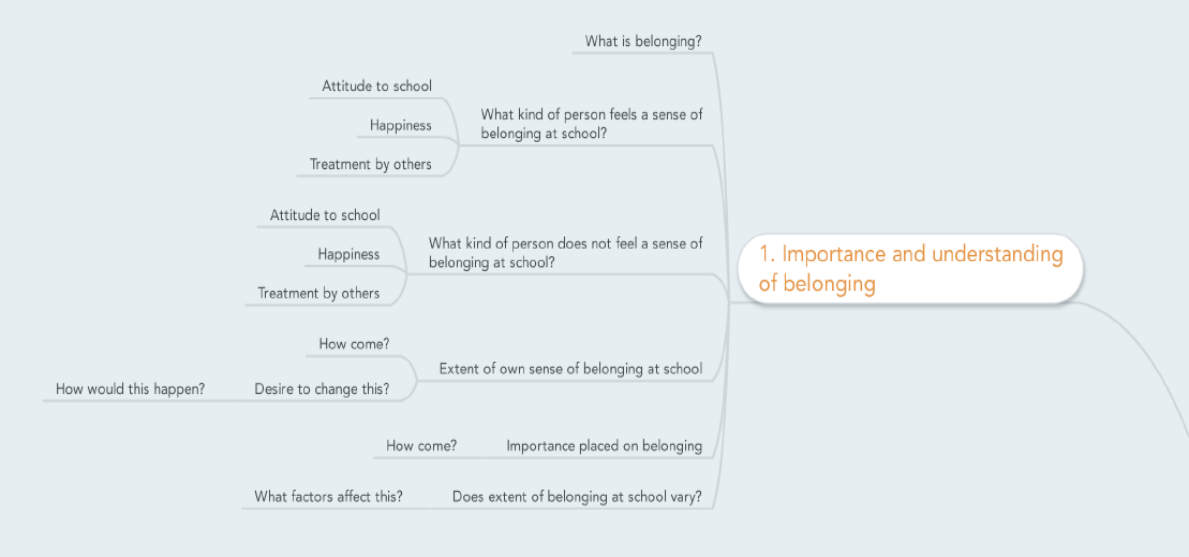
-Do staff recognise and value their strengths/ individual attributes?

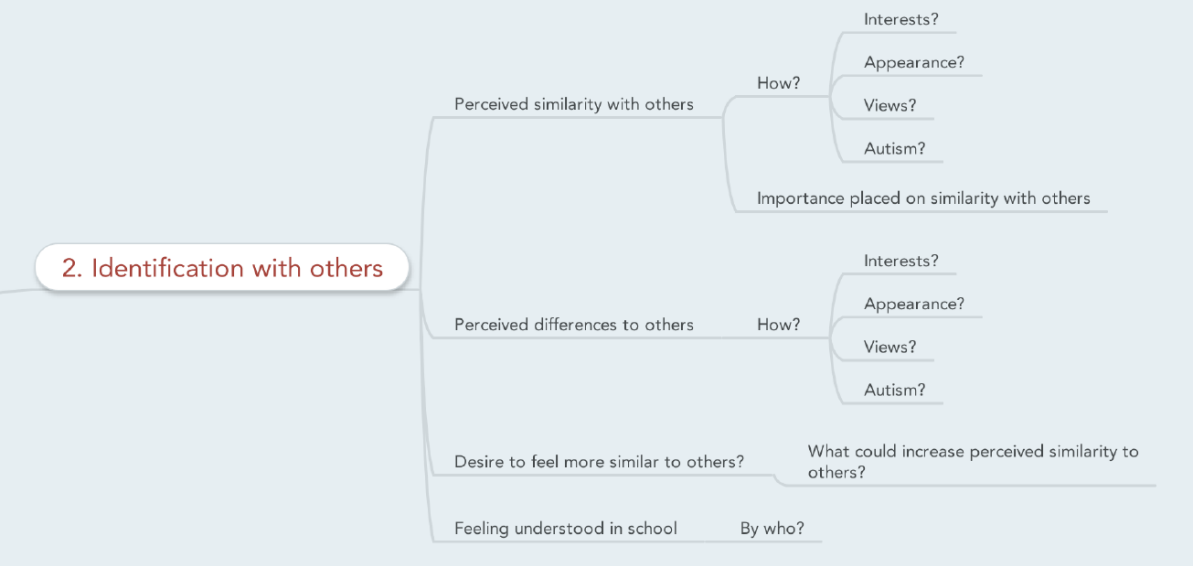
-Do staff support with sense of belonging: support with friendships/ social skills

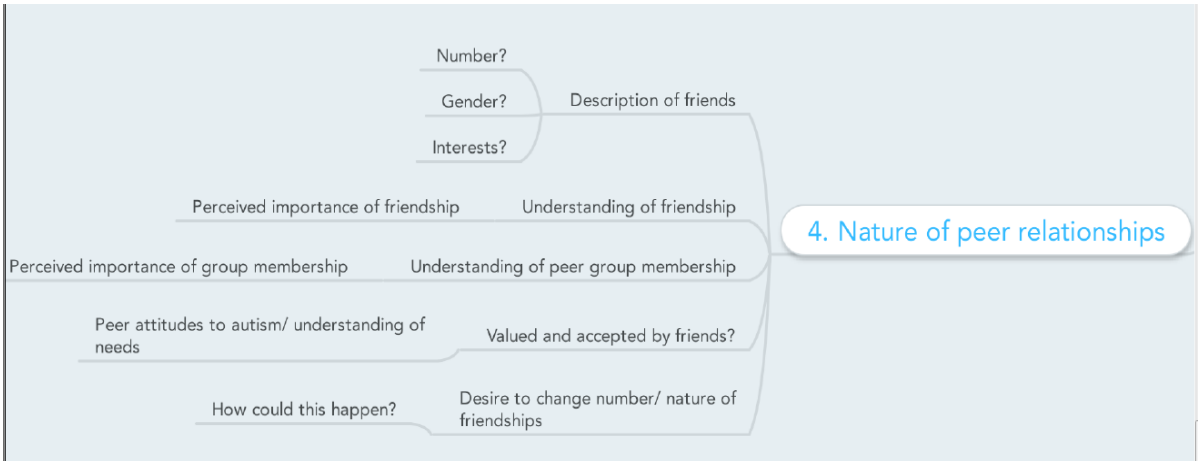
-Hidden curriculum: help to understand unspoken social rules?

-What is the nature their relationships with teachers/ TAs/ school staff? >How does this affect their sense of belonging?

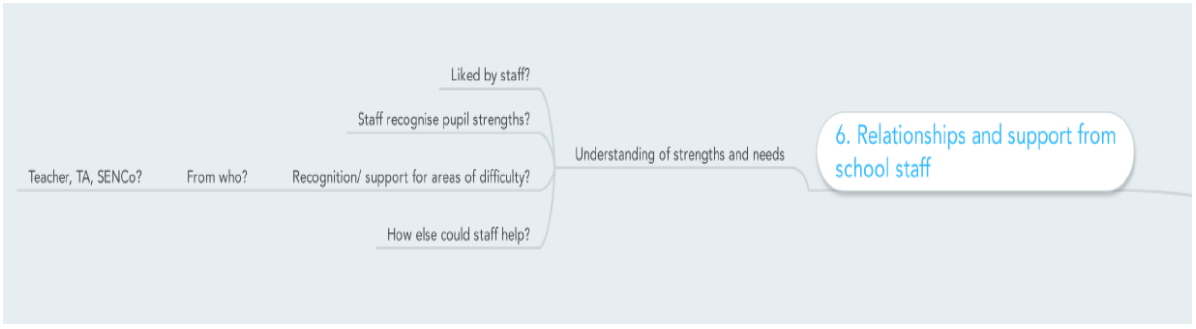
Stage 3: Concept map for final interview themes






4. Nature of peer relationships
Description of friends
Number?
Gender?
Interests?
Understanding of friendship
Perceived importance of friendship
Understanding of peer group membership
Perceived importance of group membership
Valued and accepted by friends?
Peer attitudes to autism/ understanding of needs
Desire to change number/ nature of friendships
How could this happen?


5. Social exclusion and bullying
Experience of bullying/ exclusion at school
How?
Concept of bullying/ exclusion
Where/ when?
What reduces bullying/ exclusion?
What else could be done?


6. Relationships and support from school staff
Understanding of strengths and needs
Liked by staff?
Staff recognise pupil strengths?
Recognition/ support for areas of difficulty?
From who?
Teacher, TA, SENCo?
How else could staff help?

Stage 4: Amendments to interview schedule following pilot interview

Reflection on pilot interview 29/04/16

- **Pupil interviewed:** Year 7 girl in a mixed, secondary mainstream school with a recent diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome.

What went well:

- Problem free talk, general introduction, explanation of role and research put her at ease.
- Liked the blob playground and circle of belonging (visuals got her attention).
- Drawing activities seemed to put her at ease and help her with discussion. She also found it helpful to draw on the circle of belonging.
- Interesting insights into how important friends and teachers are to her.
- Traffic lights- used when she didn't know answer.
- Visuals helped her expand on and re-visit her responses as she initially said 'there's nothing difficult about making friends'.

Areas for improvement:

- The pupil found it difficult to respond to the question: 'What do you think it means to have a sense of belonging in school?' She needed some context and seemed to have a clearer understanding of the question when I explained that a pupil I had worked with had said they felt they belonged in school and I wondered what they meant by this.

- She had difficulty responding to some of the questions around how she could be further supported in school. The question seemed to become more meaningful, and possibly safer, when I asked her to consider what might be helpful for another pupil having friendship difficulties at school.

Changes to the interview schedule following pilot:

- The question: '*What do you think it means to have a sense of belonging in school?*' became *'If a friend said that when they were at school they felt like they belonged, what would they mean?'*

- Following the question: '*What else could make it easier to form friendships at school?*' this supplementary question was added: *'If there was someone else, younger than you but a bit like you coming into the school, what would you suggest that might help them make friends?'*

- Following the question: *'What else could be done to stop bullying or people being left out?'* this supplementary question was added: '*If there was someone else, younger than you but a bit like you, being left out/ bullied, what would you suggest that might help?'*

Stage 5: Final Interview Schedule

	Question	Prompt 1	Prompt 2
Importance and understanding of belonging	If a friend said that when they were at school they felt like they belonged what would they mean?		
	Introduce blob playground: Point to a figure who belongs.		
		Why do you say that?	
	Point to a figure who does not belong.		
		Why do you say that?	
	Which of those two figures is most similar to you?		
		How come?	
	Circle of belonging introduced: *"This is the circle of belonging. People inside the circle feel a sense of belonging when they are in school. People outside the circle do not feel a sense of belonging when they are in school."* Can you tell me what kind of person would be inside the circle of belonging at school?		
		What would school be like for them?	
		How happy would they be?	
		How would other people act towards them? **(Use feelings of belonging pics as a**	

		guide)	
		How much would they fit in with others?	
			Would they be similar to others?
	Can you tell me what kind of person would be outside the circle of belonging at school?		
		What would school be like for them?	
		How happy would they be?	
		How would other people act towards them? **(Use feelings of belonging pics as a guide)**	
		How much would they fit in with others?	
			Would they be similar to others?
	Which circle are you in most of the time at school?		
		How come?	
		Are there times when you are further inside/ further outside?	
	Which circle would you like to be in most of the time at school?		
		How come?	
		What would need to happen for you to get there?	
	How important is it to be inside the circle of belonging at school?		
		How come?	

Identification with others	Tell me about the people you like to spend time with at school **(Option to draw this)**		
		How come you like spending time with them?	
	Are there people at school who are similar to you?		
		How are they similar to you? **(Mind map)**	
			Interests?
			Appearance?
			What they think is important?
			Autism/ Aspergers?
	How important is it for you to be similar to other people at school?		
		How come?	
	Are there people at school who are different to you?		
		How are they different to you? **(Mind map)**	
			Interests?
			Appearance?
			What they think is important?
			Autism/ Aspergers?
	Would you like to feel more similar to others at school?		
		What do you think could help with this?	
	If you had to be someone else at school (other student or staff) who would you most like to be?		
		What is it about them that you like / admire?	
	How much do you feel like		

	people at school understand you?		
		Who does/ does not understand you?	
	Is there anything that would help people to understand you better?		
	How much time at school do you spend with other females who have autism/ Aspergers?		
		What do you feel about this?	
	Do the people you spend time with affect how you feel about school?		
Barriers and support around social skills and fitting in	**Social challenge prompts introduced to aid with the following questions.**		
	Is there anything difficult about making friends at school?		
		Knowing what to say?	
		Knowing how to act?	
		Having the right appearance?	
		Understanding other people's behaviour and reactions?	
	What do you do to manage when you are finding these things difficult?		
		Tell teachers/ staff?	
		Copy others?	
			How does this help?
	Is there anything that helps you to make friends at school?		
		Staff?	
		Provision?	

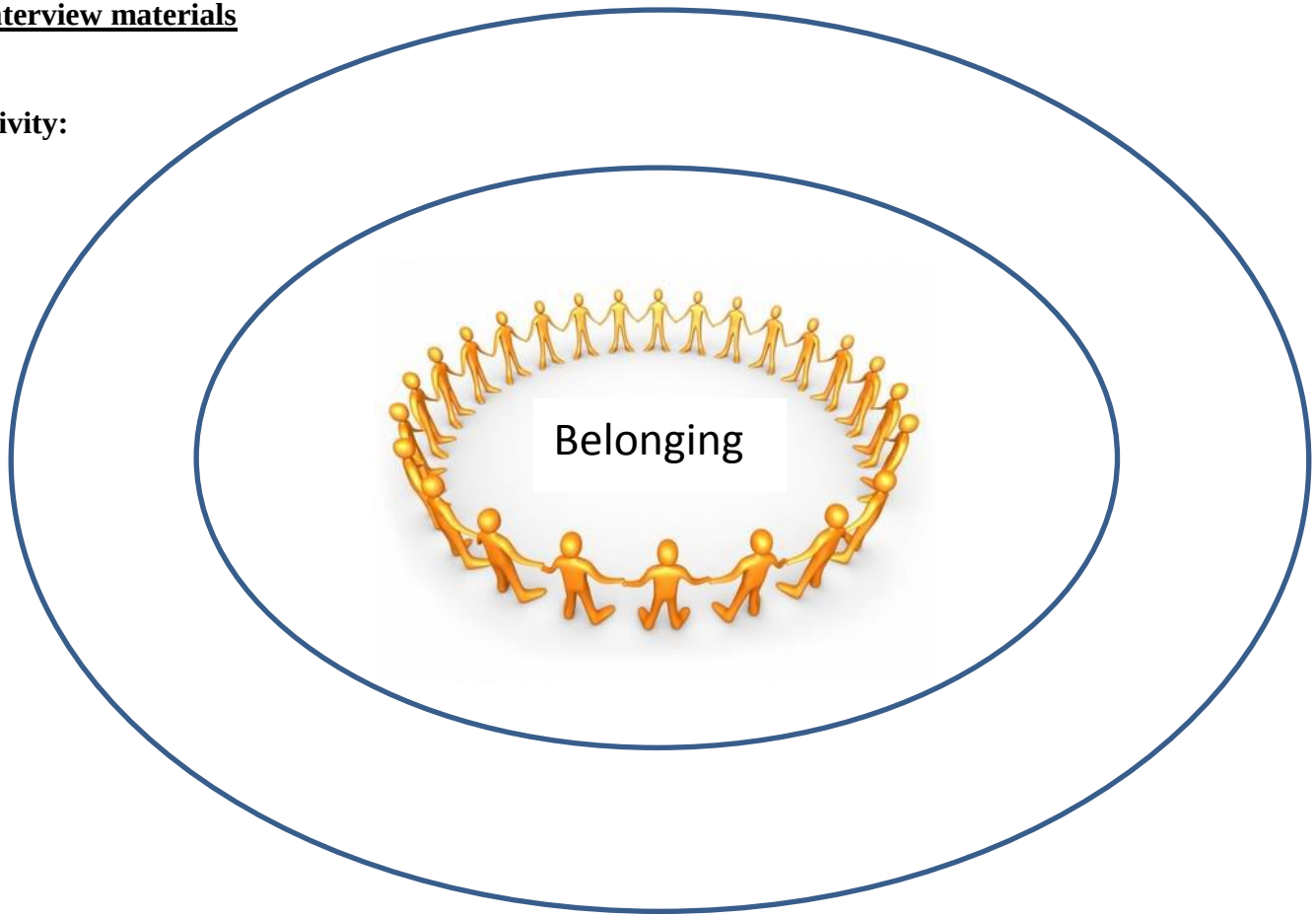
		Resources?	
	What else could make it easier to form friendships at school?		
		If there was someone else, younger than you but a bit like you coming into the school, what would you suggest that might help them make friends?	
Nature of peer relationships	Tell me about your friends at school **(Give option of drawing sociogram).**		
		How many?	
		Gender?	
		What do you like to do with your friends?	
	How important is it to have friends?		
		How come?	
	What do your friends like best about you?		
		How do you know?	
	How can you tell when someone is your friend?		
	How important is it to be part of a group?		
		How come?	
		How can you tell if you are part of a group?	
	What do your friends think about your autism/Aspergers?		
		What would your friends do if you found something difficult?	

		Do you think your friends ever wish you were any different or do they like you just how you are?	
	Is there anything you would change about the number/type of friends you have?		
		What would help you to do this?	
Social exclusion and bullying	**Introduce 'You in groups' images and discuss which figures are being left out or bullied by others**		
	Do you ever feel left out at school?		
		When?	
		By who?	
		How does that make you feel?	
	Have you ever experienced bullying from people at school?		
		What were/are you bullied for?	
		What did they do to bully you?	
		When?	
		Have you been bullied via social media?	
	Is there anything at school that helps to stop bullying or people being left out?		
	What else could be done to stop bullying or people being left out?		
		If there was someone else, younger than you but a bit like you,	

		being left out/ bullied, what would you suggest that might help?	
Relationships and support from school staff	How do you get on with the teachers and staff at school?		
		Do they like you?	
		Do they notice the things that you are really good at?	
		Do they help you with things that you find difficult?	
			How?
			Who: TAs/ teachers/ SENCo?
	Is there anything else the adults at school could do to help you?		
Re-visit 'feelings of belonging' activity	**Review completed ' feelings of belonging' sheets**		
	For each image: What do you think is happening in the picture?		
		Have you ever felt like this?	
		How did you deal with it?	
	Review responses: Did you choose different pictures/ ratings for different times of day?		
		How come?	
	What was your highest/ lowest rating on the belonging scale?		
		How come you felt like this?	

Appendix 2: Phase one interview materials

'Circles of belonging' activity:



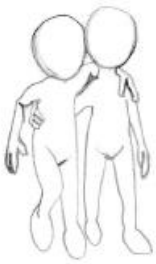
‘Feelings of belonging’ sheet

Feelings of belonging

Name: …… Date:……..

Lesson/ time of day: ……

Circle the picture that is most similar to how you felt at this time.



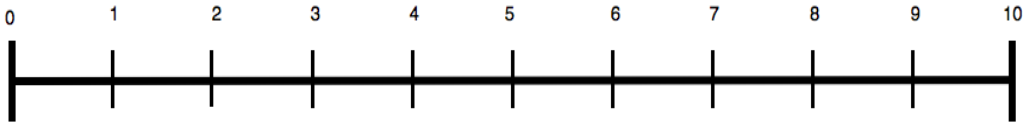
How come you chose this picture?

……

……

……

How friendly were other people to you? (Please circle a number)



Not at all Very much

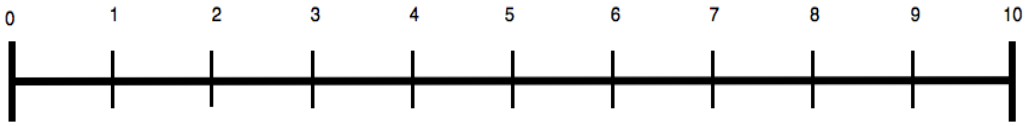
How come you chose this number?

……

……

……

How much did you feel like you fitted in? (Please circle a number)



Not at all Very much

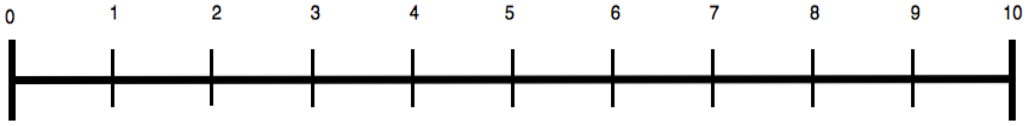
How come you chose this number?

……

……

……

How much did you feel like you belonged? (Please circle a number)



Not at all Very much

How come you chose this number?

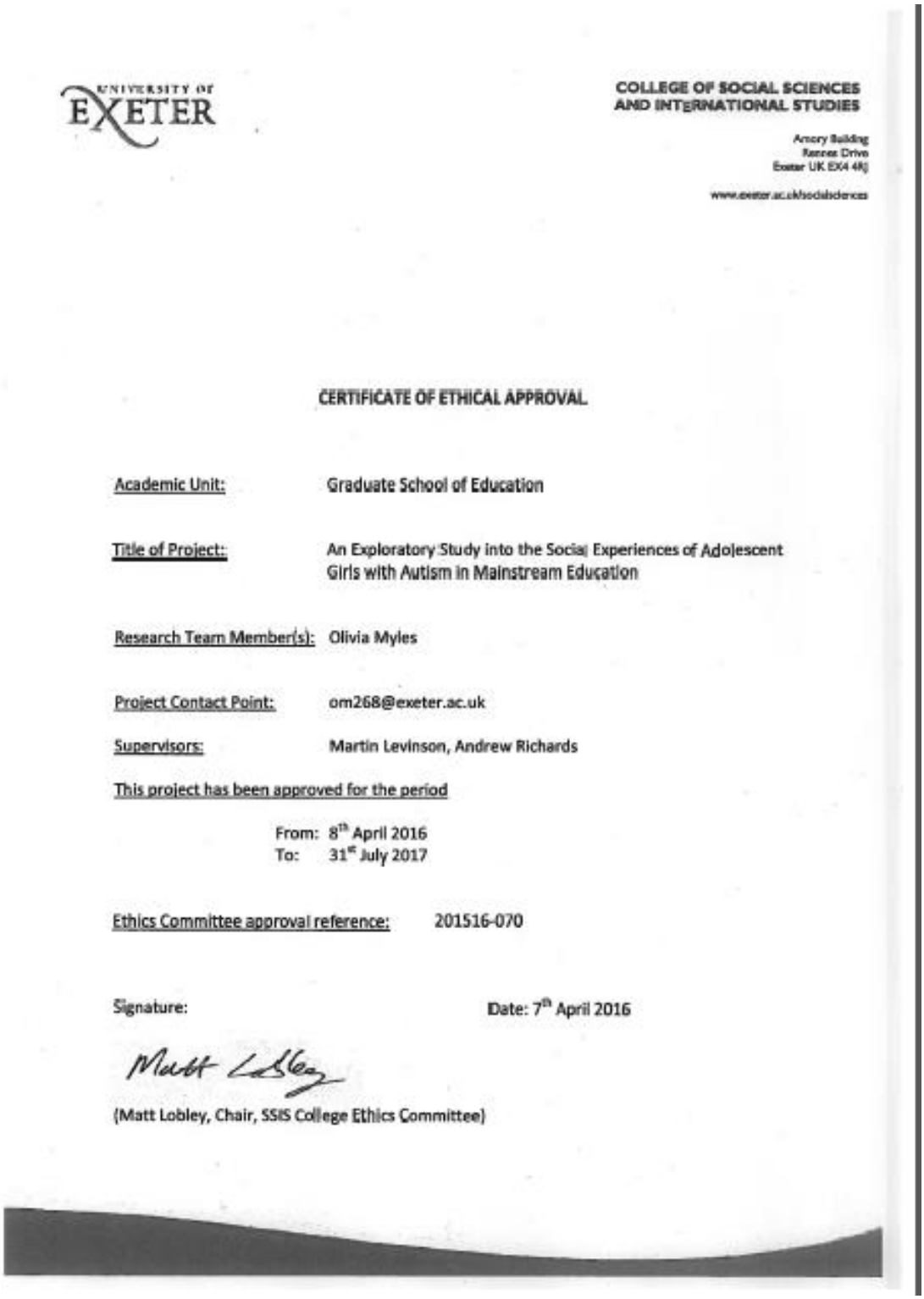
……

……

……

Appendix 3: Phase one ethical consideration materials

Certificate of ethical approval



UNIVERSITY OF EXETER

COLLEGE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

Amory Building
Rennes Drive
Exeter UK EX4 4RJ

www.exeter.ac.uk/socialsciences

CERTIFICATE OF ETHICAL APPROVAL

Academic Unit: Graduate School of Education

Title of Project: An Exploratory Study into the Social Experiences of Adolescent Girls with Autism in Mainstream Education

Research Team Member(s): Olivia Myles

Project Contact Point: om268@exeter.ac.uk

Supervisors: Martin Levinson, Andrew Richards

This project has been approved for the period

From: 8th April 2016
To: 31st July 2017

Ethics Committee approval reference: 201516-070

Signature: Date: 7th April 2016

Matt Lobley

(Matt Lobley, Chair, SSIS College Ethics Committee)

Pupil information sheet

Dear (name of pupil),

My name is Olivia Myles and I am training to be an Educational Psychologist. I visit lots of different schools and I work with children and young people to think about how we might make school bit better or easier.

Here is a picture of me:

I am writing to ask whether you would like to be involved in a project about teenage girls with autism/ Asperger syndrome. The information below explains what the project is about and what you would need to do. It would be great if you could read this and think about whether you would like to take part.

What is the project about?

This project aims to find out about the people and groups that girls with autism/ Asperger syndrome like to spend time with at school. It also aims to find out whether there is anything difficult about making friends at school and if there is anything that could make this easier

What would I need to do?

If you choose to take part in the project we would meet twice in school for about 45 minutes- 1 hour.

We will do some drawing and talking about:

- What you think about school
- Who you spend time with at school
- How easy or difficult it is to make friends at school
- What might make it easier to make friends at school

Your answers will be recorded as it will be difficult for me to write them down fast enough. When I have typed up the answers I will delete the recording.

When and where will it happen?

The project will happen during the summer term. We will meet somewhere in school that you feel comfortable. If you would prefer to meet at home that is fine.

Do I have to take part?

You do not have to take part and you can change your mind at any time. You would just need to tell me if you did not want to take part anymore.

Will people know the information in the project is about me?

When I write about the project I will not use your real name. This means that when people read about the project they will not know that the information is about you.

If you are happy to take part in the project **please sign your name** on the form called **Parent/Guardian and Pupil Consent Form**.

Thank you very much,

Olivia Myles
Trainee Educational Psychologist

Parent/ Guardian information letter

Dear Parent/Guardian,

My name is Olivia Myles and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist working for the Somerset Educational Psychology Service. I am undertaking research into females with autism as part of my Doctorate in Educational, Child and Community Psychology with the University of Exeter. I am writing to invite you and your daughter to take part in this project and to explain what this would involve. I would be very grateful if you could read the following information and decide whether or not you would be happy for yourself and your daughter to participate.

Title of research project

An exploratory study into the social experiences of adolescent females with autism in mainstream education

Aims of the research

This study seeks insight into the social experiences of adolescent females with autism in mainstream school, with a focus on their peer group membership and sense of belonging in school. It will also consider how whole school practice might address any social challenges that they identify.

What would my daughter need to do?

Your daughter would be asked to participate in two interviews lasting approximately 40 minutes to 1 hour. These would be carried out by me. The interview would involve questions about who she spends time with at school, how important friendships and peer groups are to her and what she feels would help her socially at school. It would also involve drawing activities and discussion of social scenarios to guide conversation regarding her social experiences at school. With your daughter's consent, photographs

may be taken of the completed activities and included in the project write-up. Your daughter would not appear in these photographs.

I will aim to make the process as enjoyable and comfortable as possible. Time will be spent beforehand finding out the best location and time of day to interview pupils. Additionally, your daughter can request that she is accompanied by you or a member of school staff during the interview if this would make her more comfortable.

Responses and materials gathered from the interviews will be anonymised. They will then guide the themes discussed during interviews with parents of females with autism and focus groups with school staff and professionals. Parent interviews and focus groups will seek participants' views of the social challenges for adolescent females with autism in mainstream education. They will also consider how school practice might be adapted to address the social challenges identified by the pupils during the interviews.

Interviews and focus groups will be recorded on a dictaphone and later transcribed. Once transcribed, recordings will be deleted.

When and where will the research take place?

The research would take place between April and December 2016 in your daughter's school. However, interviews can be carried out at home if this is preferable for you and your daughter.

How is confidentiality maintained?

Interview and focus group recordings and transcripts will be held in confidence and will be completely anonymous. Participants and schools will be referred to in the research write-up using code names. Details that could identify participants will be omitted. All data will be stored on a password protected computer and will be destroyed when the analysis and final research write-up is complete. The final report will be used for my doctoral thesis. Participant names will **not** be used in the report.

Can I withdraw from the study if I change my mind?

Participation is completely voluntary and you can withdraw your consent at any stage without needing to give reasons. Any contribution made by you or your daughter at this point can be destroyed if you wish. If you and your daughter are happy I would be grateful if you could both ***complete and sign the attached consent form and return it by***

the specified date. Forms may be returned to the school reception **or** scanned and sent to my email address shown below**.**

Contact Details

For further information about this research please feel free to contact me, Olivia Myles at om268@exeter.ac.uk.

You can also contact my university supervisors regarding the research at A.J.Richards@exeter.ac.uk or M.P.Levinson@exeter.ac.uk.

This research will be important in order to help your daughter's school understand and support her needs most effectively. I would like to thank you very much for taking the time to consider your and/ or your daughter's participation.

Kind regards,

Olivia Myles

Trainee Educational Psychologist

Parent/Guardian and Pupil consent form

Project title: *An exploratory study into the social experiences of adolescent females with autism in mainstream education*

I have been informed about the aims of the research and I understand what my/ my daughter's participation will involve. **YES/ NO**

I understand that any information which I/my daughter provides will be anonymised and used only for the purpose of this research project, which may include publications. **YES/ NO**

I understand that I do not have to take part and I can withdraw consent at any time. **YES/ NO**

I understand that information that I/my daughter provides will be confidential and anonymous. **YES/ NO**

Parent/Guardian (Please tick the appropriate box/boxes below)

I give consent for my daughter to take part in the interviews ☐

I agree to take part in the parent/guardian interviews ☐

.....……..…… .....……

(Parent/guardian name) (Date)

……

(Parent/guardian signature)

If you are happy to, I would be very grateful if you could provide some contact details in order to arrange the interviews.

…… …….

(Parent/guardian email address) (Parent/guardian telephone)

Pupil

I have read the information sheet and agree to take part in this project.

(Please circle one of the answers below)

 YES

 NO

I am happy for photographs of the activities I complete to be used in the project.

(Please circle one of the answers below)

 YES

 NO

.....……..…… ……..……..

(Name of pupil) (Date)

……

(Pupil signature)

If you would prefer for the project to take place at your home instead of at school please tick the box below.

☐

School information sheet

Dear …….

I am undertaking research into females with autism as part of my Doctorate in Educational, Child and Community Psychology with the University of Exeter. I am writing to invite your school to take part in this project and to explain what this would involve. I would be very grateful if you could read the following information and decide whether or not you would be happy to participate.

Title of research project

An exploratory study into the social experiences of adolescent females with autism in mainstream education

Aims of the research

This study seeks insight into the social experiences of adolescent females with autism in mainstream school, with a focus on their peer group membership and sense of belonging in school. It will also consider how whole school practice can address any social challenges that they identify.

Where and when will the research take place?

The research would take place at your school/ the pupil's home between April and December 2016.

What would this involve?

I would like to interview female pupils (aged 11-18) who have a formal diagnosis of autism or Asperger syndrome. I would meet each pupil on two occasions for 40 minutes to 1 hour. The interview would involve questions about who she spends time with at school, how important friendships and peer groups are to her and what she feels would help her socially at school. It would also involve a drawing activity and discussion of social scenes to guide conversation regarding her social experiences at school.

I will aim to make the process as enjoyable and comfortable as possible. Time will be spent beforehand finding out the best location and time of day to interview pupils. Pupils can be accompanied by a parent/member of school staff during the interview if this would make them more comfortable. They can also request that they are interviewed at their home instead of in school. I will obtain written consent from parents/guardians for their daughter to take part.

Following the analysis of the pupil interviews I hope to carry out:

- Individual interviews with the parents/guardians of females with autism
- A focus group of 3-5 members of your school staff who teach/support female pupil/s with autism (e.g. SENCo, teachers, TAs, SLT)

Parent interviews and focus groups would seek participants' views around the social challenges for adolescent females with autism in mainstream education. They would also involve discussion of the themes that have emerged from the pupil interviews. Finally, they would consider how the school might support females with autism in regards to any social challenges the pupils have identified.

If you agree, the school staff focus group would take place in your school at a time that would be most convenient for your staff. Parent/ guardian interviews would take place either at the school or the family home (depending on school and parent/guardian preferences).

How is confidentiality maintained?

Interview and focus group recordings and transcripts will be held in confidence and will be completely anonymous. Participants and schools will be referred to in the research write-up using code names. Details that could identify participants and schools will be omitted. All data will be stored on a password protected computer and will be destroyed when the analysis and final research write-up is complete. The final report will be used for my doctoral thesis.

Interviews and focus groups will be recorded on a dictaphone and later transcribed. Once transcribed, recordings will be deleted.

Can I withdraw from the study if I change my mind?

Participation is completely voluntary and you can withdraw your consent at any stage without needing to give reasons.

If you are happy I would be grateful if you could ***complete the attached consent form*** and return a scanned copy to my email address shown below**.**

Contact Details

For further information about this research please feel free to contact me, Olivia Myles at om268@exeter.ac.uk.

You can also contact my university supervisors regarding the research at A.J.Richards@exeter.ac.uk or M.P.Levinson@exeter.ac.uk.

Thank you very much for taking the time to consider your school's participation in this research. The findings will be important in order to develop our understanding of the unique needs of females with autism and to provide them with the most effective support possible.

Kind regards,

Olivia Myles

Trainee Educational Psychologist

Appendix 4: Stages of thematic analysis- Phase one

Examples of coded interview transcripts

Jasmine- coded interview excerpt

So can you tell me what kind of person would be inside the circle of belonging in school?

Someone who's good and wears correct uniform.

Anything else?

Like helpful, kind…

What would school be like for them?

It would be good.

How come it would be good?

Cos they would behave.

So what would that mean if they behaved?

It means they can be with everyone there and be good.

And how happy would they be?

Happy.

How would other people act towards them do you think?

Not sure.

So if you were inside the circle of belonging, how do you think other people wold act towards you? (Choosing from pictures)

Like that one.

How come you chose that one?

Cos me and X always do that together.

Really? You walk around with your arms around each other like that?

Sometimes, yeah.

Do any of the others remind you of how other people would act towards you if you belonged?

That one.

Yeah, why do you say that one?

Cos I'm always with my friends.

(Referring to pictures) So how is this person acting towards this person?

Helping. Cos I've got a bad knee at the moment, so…

And how are these other people acting?

They're just helping each other by being with them.

Ella- coded interview excerpt

So would you ever tell teachers if you were finding something tricky at school?

No.

How come?

Cos I just find it quite awkward to talk about it and I don't think many of them know that I have Aspergers and it's just… and all my friends are there and they don't know either. I go quite red in the face when I don't know what they're saying.

And would you like that to be any different?

Err yes but then I don't want it to be obvious that I'm getting help at the same time.

And is there anything that happens at school that makes it a bit easier to make friends?

Um… I go to a thing every Wednesday at lunch time called xxx, which is just a place to go and you eat your lunch there. But none of my friends go there. It's just a place to go like away from every body and people from student support run it. And that's like nice and they have hot chocolate there. And it's quite nice cos my Godsister, xxx, she goes there. So we sit there as a place to go and they chat about like how's your week's going and that's been a nice thing to do.

Would more things like that be good do you think?

Yeah.

What else could school do to make it even easier to make friends and talk to other people and help you cope with all those things that are difficult?

Not really sure…just…don't know.

Say there was someone else starting at this school who was like you, maybe a bit younger than you and they were really struggling to make friends. What advice would you give them do you think?

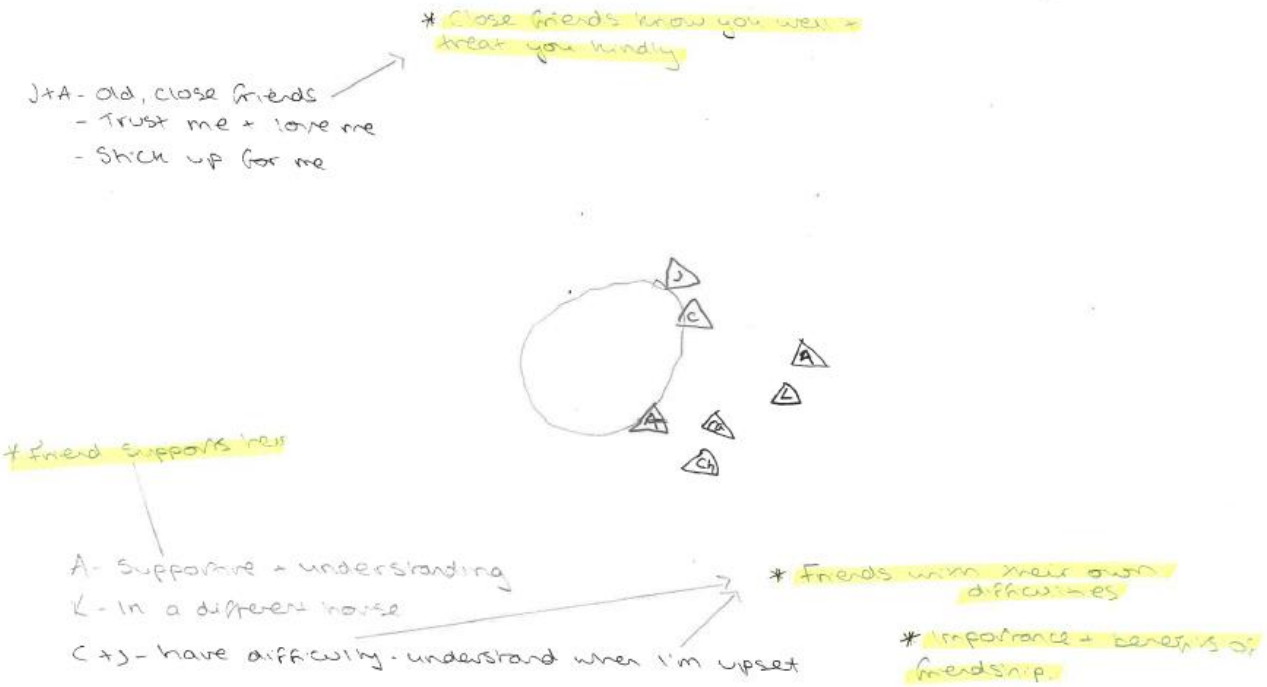
I'd just say be confident and be yourself.

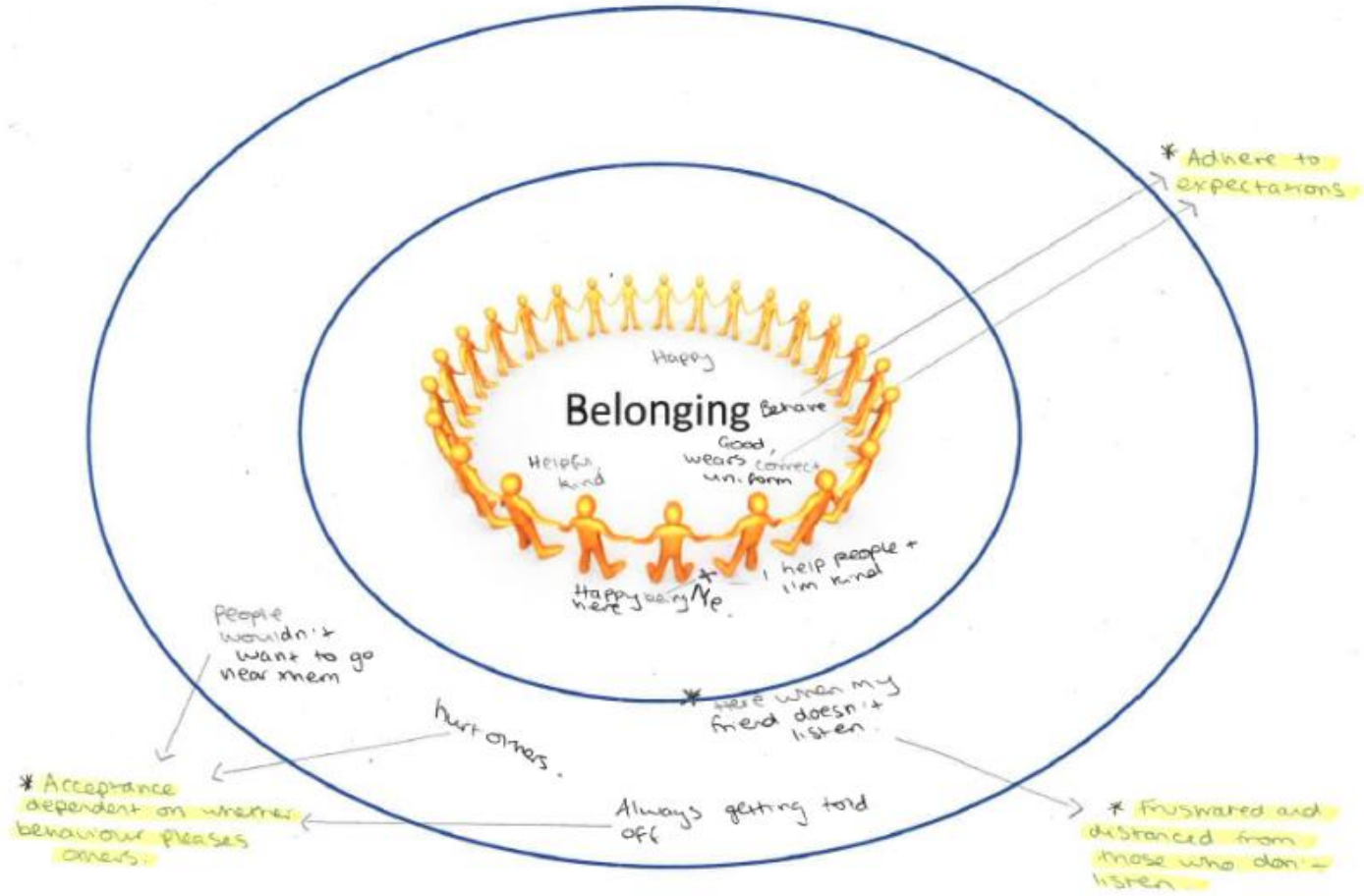
And what if the teachers said we need to put something in place to help this person and they came to you to ask what might help this new person make friends?

That's hard. Hmm maybe something at tutor time like…cos at tutor time we just do like talking, like world view. In tutor time maybe just like a break from it and a party or something but not actually saying that it's for that person, just saying it's this. And then it helps them to make friends cos then she gets chatting.

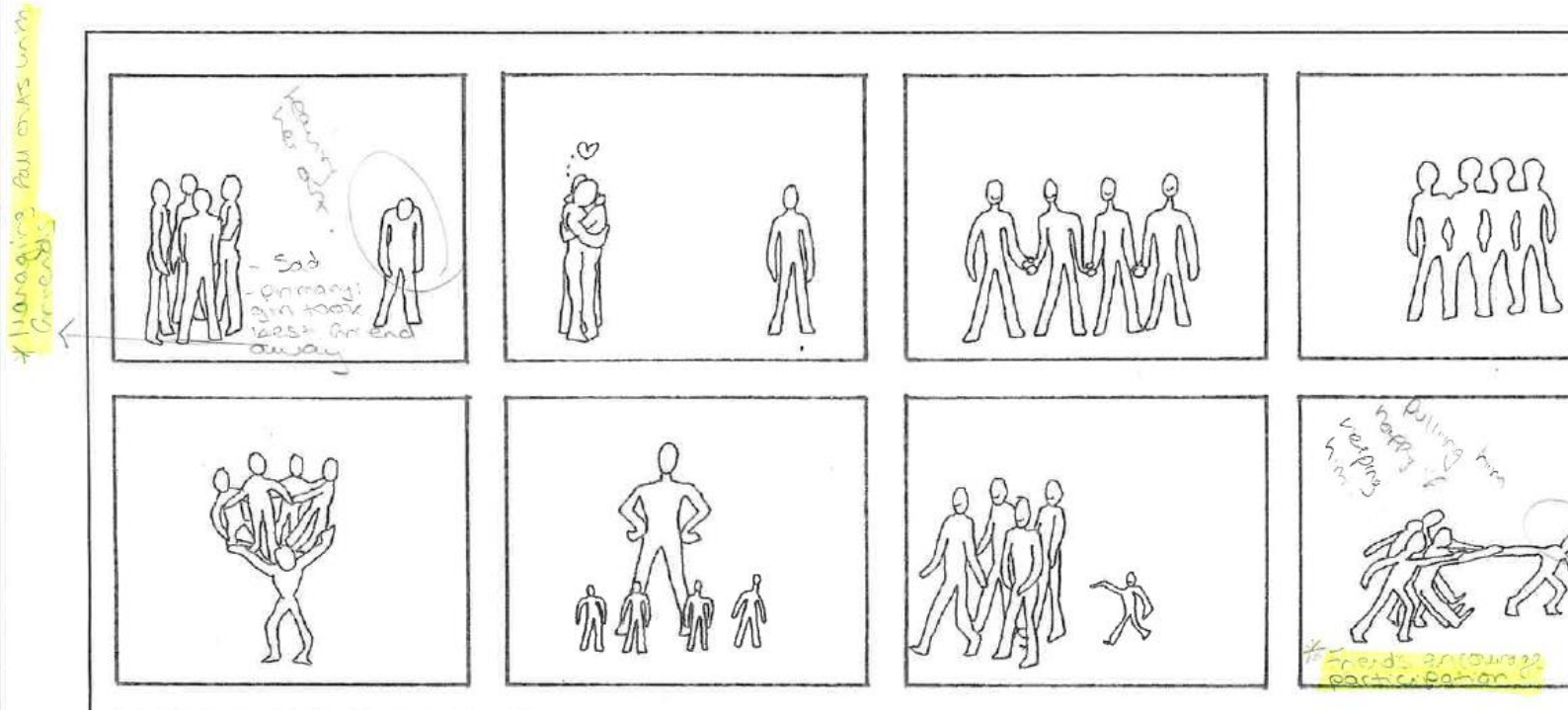
Examples of coded visual talking tools (Jasmine)

Highlighted text shows initial codes.

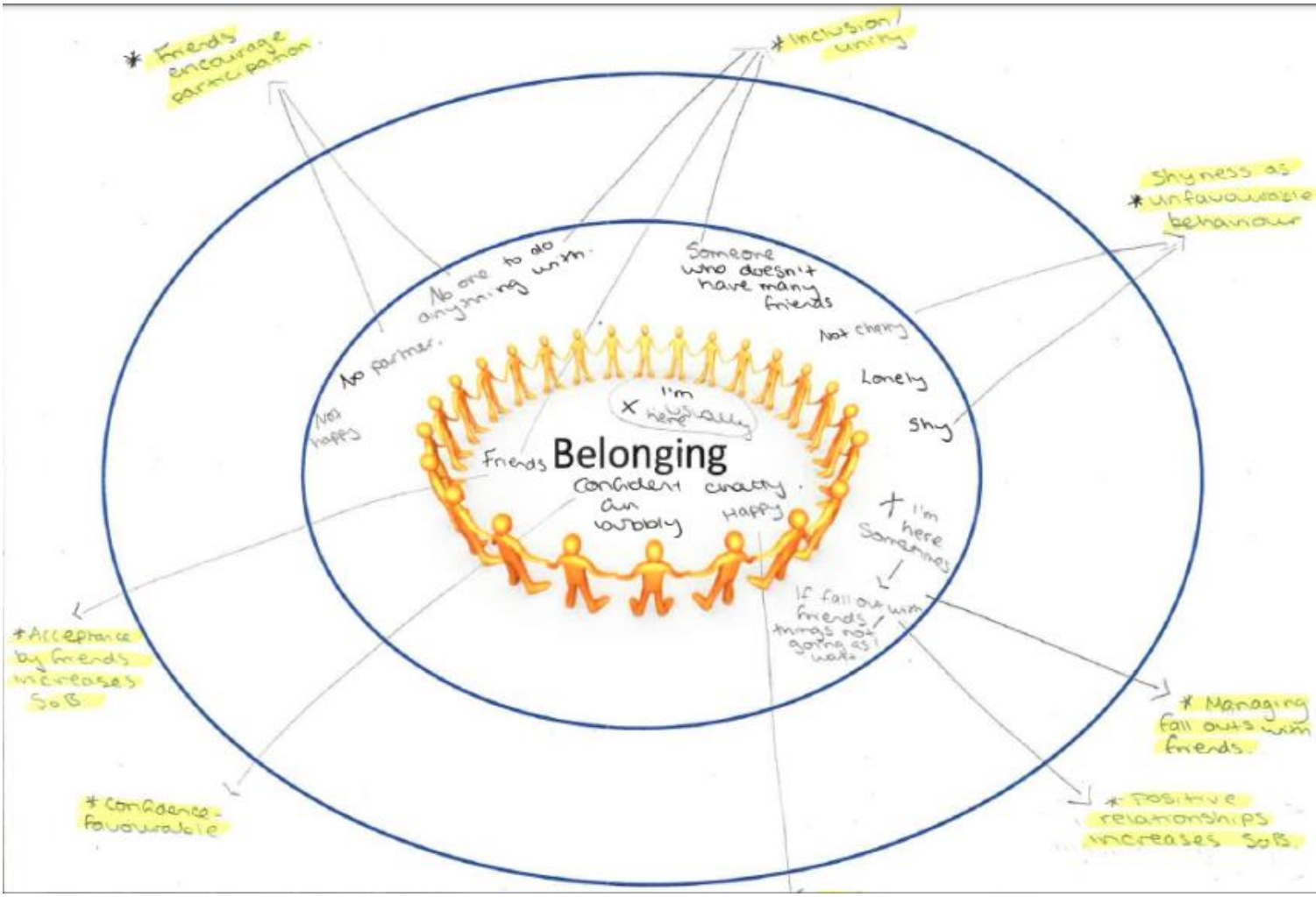




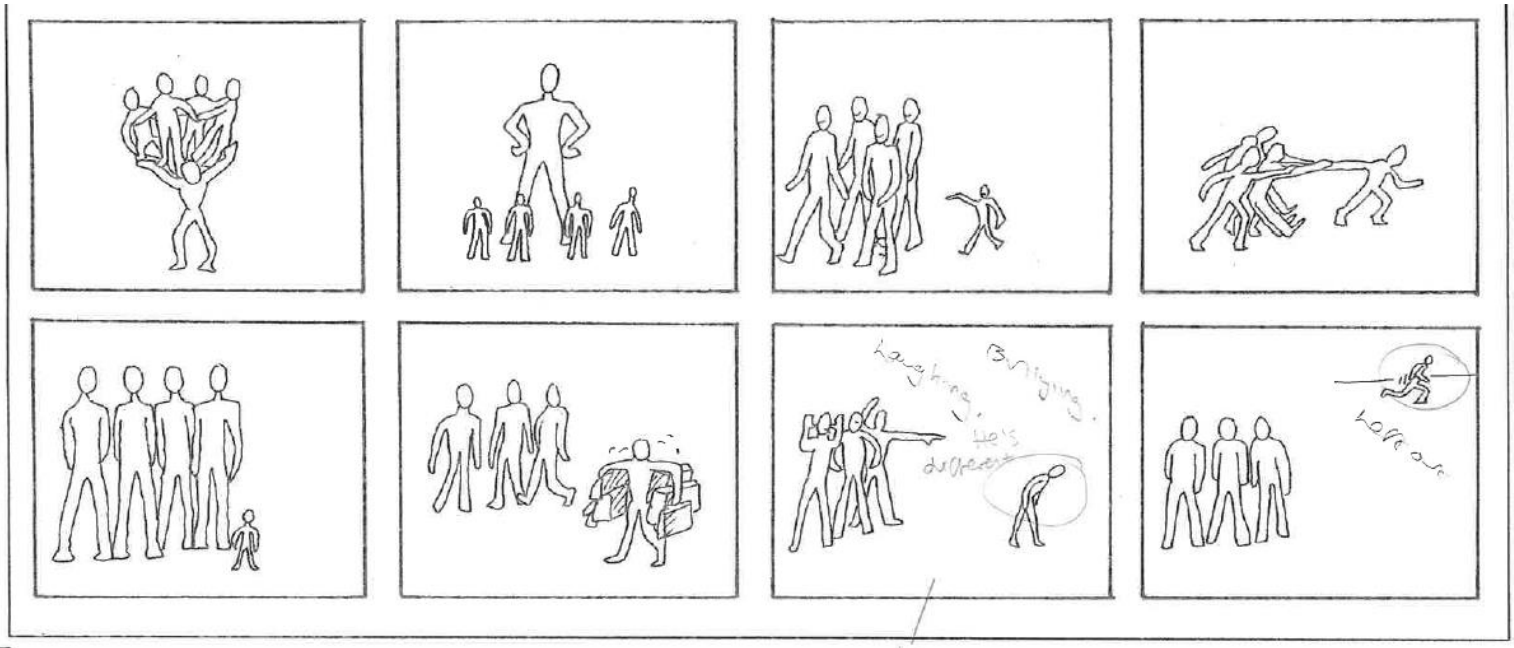

BLOB PLAYGROUND
www.blobtree.com
* Friends encourage participation
* Vulnerable when not friends
pushing / laughing at him
Belongs
NB
Me
TIM WILSON + IAN LONG 2005


* Having fun as a group
- Sad
- primary girl took best friend away
pulling him
crying
* Friends encourage participation

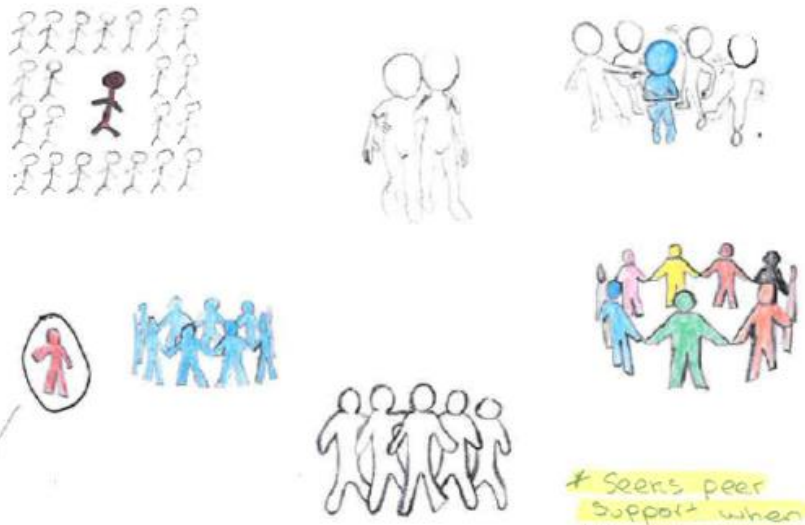
Examples of coded visual talking tools (Ella)




www.blobtree.com
* Vulnerable without friends
Does not belong
- No friends
- No one looking at him
- No one sticking up for him
Let's all be friends!
NB
Does not belong
- Eye drops down
→ sad
NB
DP WILSON & JAN LONG 2008
* On the fringes
* Importance of friendship to friends
Belong - close together, smiling
Friends = belonging
* Friendship / positive relationships increases self


Laughing
Bullying
He's different
Horrible
* Peers don't accept difference

Circle the picture that is most similar to how you felt at this time.



* Seeks peer support when unsure of what to do

How come you chose this picture?

In history I was really tired and I wasn't listening at all to what the teacher was saying when she said to start working. Suddenly everyone was silent I asked my freid what we were doing and she said an assessment

* Feeling unsure is isolating

I chose this picture because I didn't have any idea what I was supposed to do and I couldn't ask anybody por help as we were in silence, so I was stuck.

* Unable to ask for help

* Impact of seating and groups

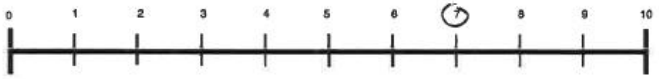
How friendly were other people to you? (Please circle a number)

Not at all Very much

How come you chose this number?

As I was so tired today I wasn't in a charty mood so and in lessons I wasn't sat with my friends so people didn't talk much as we are not close friends.

How much did you feel like you fitted in? (Please circle a number)



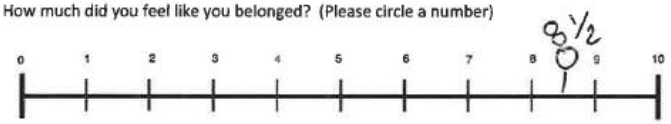
Not at all Very much

How come you chose this number?

because I was with my freinds all day but was to tired to be that involved

* Tiredness impacts level of involvement

How much did you feel like you belonged? (Please circle a number)



Not at all Very much

How come you chose this number?

because I sat with all my friends at lunch and was happy

* Importance of proximity to friends

* Friendship → happiness

Initial coding of visual methods

Code:
Those who belong are in charge
Enjoying fun with friends
Importance of inclusion and unity
Opportunities to talk to friends are essential
Friendships improve school experience
Wanting to be somewhere else
Social opportunities outside school Autism makes her different
Different interests to peers
Close friends know you well and treat you kindly
Friends with their own difficulties
Importance and benefits of friendship
Accused of being controlling
Peers unfriendly
Autism affects identification with others
Belonging linked to clear expectations
Peers don't accept difference
Desire for peers to understand autism
Exclusion causes unhappiness
Included in conversation
Vulnerable without friends
Lack of participation
Dissonance between desire for belonging and lack of desire for more friends
Respect from others
Time away from others
Importance of inclusion and unity
Academic ability affects sense of belonging
Desires experience of popularity
One key friend
Being ignored means isolation
Lack of skills to make friends
Craves normality
Sense of belonging brings happiness, friendship and popularity
Friend understands what it's like to have autism and social difficulties
Common interests with friends
Friends encourage participation
Acceptance dependent on whether behaviour pleases others
Frustrated and distracted from those who don't listen
Adhere to expectations
Expanding friendship group
Verbal confirmation of friendship
Managing fall outs with friends
Sense of belonging dependent on feeling comfortable
Isolated from peers
Sense of belonging increases happiness
Acceptance by friends increases sense of belonging

Lacking skills to make friends
Shyness as unfavourable behaviour
Peers unfriendly
Teased and excluded by old group of friends
Group participation
Not like girly girls
On the periphery
Importance of proximity to friends
Friendships and positive relationships increase sense of belonging
Feeling stuck is isolating
Unable to ask for help
Impact of seating and groups
Seeks peer support when unsure of what to do
Tiredness impacts level of involvement
Confidence seen as favourable
New friends know little about her
Friends with their own difficulties
Someone to talk to
Don’t have to be similar to friends
Fits in with others
Exclusion by peers causes unhappiness
Feeling ignored and dismissed
Lack of peer understanding
Presence not valued
Quality of friendship as opposed to quantity
Managing frequently changing group structures
Preference for small friendship group
Not close with others
Didn’t feel or want to be very close to group
People who fit in can adapt their behaviour to others
Social opportunities outside school
Not in with the popular people
Pressure of being popular not wanted
Excluded from conversations
More relaxed with fewer people
Mood of teacher important

See Table 13 below for details on how the coding of the visual talking tools contributed to the process of thematic analysis.

Table 13. Process of thematic analysis- Phase one

Text in red shows codes added following further analysis of visual talking tools.

Initial coding	Emerging themes	Review and refinement of themes	Final theme and sub-themes
SoB brings happiness, friendship and popularity	Friendship and positive relationships create happiness	**Support of a 'true friend'** -Key to happiness and belonging	**Reciprocal friendships** - Important qualities of friendship - Makes school a happier place
Sense of belonging increases happiness			
Acceptance by friends increases SoB			
Verbal confirmation of friendship			
Positive relationships increase sense of belonging			
'True' friends are understanding and supportive	Setting apart 'true friends'		
Close friends know you well and treat you kindly			
Don't have to be similar to friends			
Quality of friendship as opposed to quantity			
New friends know little about her			
Close relationships with those who understand her			
Friends provide support and happiness	Friends support and motivate		
Friend supports her			

Friends affect her motivation to attend school	*(Continued: Friends support and motivate)*	***(Continued: Support of a 'true friend'*** *-Key to happiness and belonging)*	***(Continued: Reciprocal friendships*** *- Important qualities of friendship - Makes school a happier place)*
Friendships improve school experience			
Liking of school linked to having friends			
Importance and benefits of friendship			
Friends as a basic need			
Bad friends make bad company			
Friends as a basic need	Safety and security of friendship		
Vulnerable without friends			
Friends provide safety and protection			
Importance of proximity to friends			
Worried about losing friends			
Activities and conversation with friends is important	Talking to friends promotes well-being		
Someone to talk to			
Opportunities to talk to friends are essential			
Talking to friends increases happiness and feelings of acknowledgement			

Desires experience of popularity	Importance of inclusion and unity	**Importance of inclusion and unity**	**Encouragement and inclusion**
Craves inclusion			
Importance of inclusion and unity			
Important to attend 'normal' school			
Likes time with peers without additional needs			
Inclusion and belonging with form group			
Time with friends- confirms closeness			
Group participation			
Expanding friendship group			
Included in conversation			
Inclusion by peers makes her feel normal			
Friends encourage participation	Friends encourage participation	**Feeling safe and supported**	**Feeling safe and supported**
Friends stop you looking like a loner			
Safety and security	Safe social spaces		
Sense of belonging dependent on feeling comfortable			
Student support centre as a safe space			
Art room is a safe space			
Time away from others			

Didn't feel, or want to be very close to the group	Lack of participation as a protective mechanism	***(Continued: Feeling safe and supported)***	***(Continued: Feeling safe and supported)***
Unresolved argument put her off making close friendships at school			
Opportunities to check in	Opportunities to talk things through	**Importance of social opportunities** -Talking things through -Being listened to	**Opportunities to 'talk it through'**
Activities and conversation with friends is important	Talking to friends promotes well-being		
Opportunities to talk to friends are essential			
Talking to friends increases happiness and feelings of acknowledgement			
Values 1:1 time			
Special school outreach supports with social skills and friendships	Social opportunities		
Social opportunities outside school			
SoB depends on opportunities to make the right connections	Opportunities: -To make the right connections		

Opportunities to make friends Seating plans can affect opportunities to make friends Likes time with peers without additional needs	-To make friends -Importance of seating plans	***(Continued: Importance of social opportunities*** *-Talking things through* *-Being listened to)*	***(Continued: Opportunities to 'talk it through')***
Feels more content and understood when with adults Lack of peer understanding Lack of peer understanding is frustrating Desire for peers to understand her autism more Wants others to understand her more Would like people in school to know more about her Lack of autism understanding increases isolation in secondary Felt irrelevant when others doubted her autism	A need to be understood	**Awareness and understanding** -From friends -From teachers	**Feeling understood** -Shared interests and values

One key friend	A key friend who understands	***(Continued: Awareness and understanding*** *-From friends -From teachers)*	***(Continued: Feeling understood*** *-Shared interests and values*)
Friend understands what it's like to have autism and social difficulties			
Shared understanding between her and friend with autism			
Friends with their own difficulties			
Friend is understanding and trustworthy			
Secondary staff are helpful and inclusive	Importance of teacher awareness and understanding		
Teacher awareness and understanding			
Lack of understanding from teachers			
Staff awareness of what supports her			
Poor relationships and lack of understanding from staff			
Dislikes teachers who shout and moan			
Enjoys talking about shared interests with 'nice' people	Importance of shared interests and social expectations	**Shared interests and values**	
Shares similarities with friend			
Shared social expectations between her and friend			
Belonging linked to clear expectations			

Common interests with friends SoB increased through sharing common interests with peers Similarity with friends strengthens relationships Would like to feel more similar to others	*(Continued: Importance of shared interests and social expectations)*	***(Continued: Shared interests and values)***	***(Continued: Feeling understood*** *-Shared interests and values*)
People who fit in/belong are intelligent, confident, energetic and funny **Academic ability affects sense of belonging** Confidence seen as favourable **Shyness as unfavourable behaviour**	Energy, intelligence and confidence as desirable characteristics	**Adapting to please others** -'Pleasing' behaviour - Unfavourable behaviour - An image to aspire to	**Establishing and adhering to social expectations**
Desirable/ complementary characteristics between friends People who fit in can adapt their behaviour to others **Fits in with others** Acceptance dependent on whether behaviour pleases others **Adhere to expectations**	Adapting behaviour to others		

		(Continued: Adapting to please others	***(Continued: Establishing and adhering to social expectations)***
Aspirations and role models	An image to aspire to	*- 'Pleasing' behaviour*	
Desire to be more able		*- Unfavourable behaviour*	
Still working out who she is		*- An image to aspire to)*	
Autism prevents her being who she wants to be			
Craves normality	Importance of being normal		
Feels valued for 'getting on' and not being annoying	Behaviour that annoys others		
Feels she annoys others			
Can offend others with humour, or when agitated			
Accused of being controlling			
Friends have difficulty understanding her slow processing			

Didn't feel, or want to be very close to the group **Lack of participation** Unresolved argument put her off making close friendships at school	Lack of participation as a protective mechanism	**Being on the periphery** -Need for inclusion and unity -Outside looking in -Limited understanding means limited participation	**Being on the periphery** -On the periphery during group interactions -On the periphery within the classroom
On the periphery **Wanting to be somewhere else** Feeling ignored/ dismissed **Those who belong are in charge** Excluded from conversations **Tiredness impacts level of involvement** People might talk to you, but not invite you in **Not close with others** Not in with the popular people Being ignored means isolation	On the periphery		
Teased and excluded by old group of friends **Isolated from peers** Excluded by tutor group	Excluded from the group		

Exclusion by peers causes unhappiness **Peers unfriendly**	*(Continued: Excluded from the group)*	***(Continued: Being on the periphery*** *-Need for inclusion and unity* *-Outside looking in* *-Limited understanding means limited participation)*	***(Continued: Being on the periphery*** *-On the periphery during group interactions* *-On the periphery within the classroom)*
Minimal participation in lessons she didn't understand	Lack of understanding means lack of participation		
Seeks peer support when unsure of what to do			
Unable to ask for help			
Dislikes teachers who don't explain, are sarcastic and delay the lesson	Lack of explanation can be isolating		
Difficulty understanding why staff tell her off			
Clarity and presentation of information in class could be improved			
Frustrated and distanced from those who don't listen	Not being listened to	**Personal value** -Not being listened to -Treated as stupid and different -Feeling hated -Teacher impact on feeling valued	**Feeling de- valued** -Not being listened to -Underestimated by others -Possessing unfavourable attributes
People don't listen			
Not listened to or understood by peers			
School do not listen to her suggestions			
Feels left out when peers don't listen			

Respect from others	*(Continued: Not being listened to)*	***(Continued: Personal value***	***Feeling de- valued***
		-Not being listened to	*-Not being listened to*
Presence not valued	**Presence not valued**	*-Treated as stupid and different*	*-Underestimated by others*
		-Feeling hated	*-Possessing unfavourable attributes*
Treated differently due to her autism	Treated as stupid and weird	*-Teacher impact on feeling valued)*	
People see her as stupid			
Others treat her as a weird person			
Feels hated and teased by some; particularly boys	Feeling hated		
Feels disliked by some peers			
Boy who fitted in hated her			
Awareness of strengths gauged through test results	Teacher impact on feeling valued		
Awareness of personal attributes			
Work is de-valued			
Mood of teacher important			
Teachers acknowledge her strengths			

Felt irrelevant when others doubted her autism	Others' acceptance and understanding of autism	**Awareness and understanding of autism** - A need to be understood	**Limited awareness and understanding of autism**
Desire for peers to understand her autism more			
Peers don't accept difference	Peers don't accept difference		
Compares herself to other pupils with additional needs			
Feels more content and understood when with adults	A need to be understood		
Lack of peer understanding			
Lack of peer understanding is frustrating			
Desire for peers to understand her autism more			
Wants others to understand her more			
Would like people in school to know more about her			
Lack of autism understanding increases isolation in secondary			
Felt irrelevant when others doubted her autism			

School talk from an adult with autism could encourage understanding of difference/ increase pupil confidence	Increase autism awareness in school	***(Continued: Awareness and understanding of autism*** - *A need to be understood)*	***(Continued: Limited awareness and understanding of autism)***
Opportunities to learn from adult role models helps with social skills/ feeling understood			
Secondary staff are helpful and inclusive	Importance of teacher awareness and understanding	**Importance of teacher awareness and understanding**	
Teacher awareness and understanding			
Lack of understanding from teachers			
Staff awareness of what supports her			
Poor relationships and lack of understanding from staff			
Dislikes teachers who shout and moan			
Identification with others	A desire to identify with others	**Identification with others** -A desire to identify with others -Being the odd one out	**Desire for identification with others** -Being the odd one out -Different to other girls with autism
Autism affects identification with others			
Different interests to peers			
Wanted to find a girl who's autistic, but not severely			
Identifies with a friend who has			

difficulties. Likes to feel the same.	*(Continued: A desire to identify with others)*	***(Continued: Identification with others*** *-A desire to identify with others -Being the odd one out)*	***(Continued: Desire for identification with others*** *-Being the odd one out -Different to other girls with autism)*
Might be easier to involve herself at university			
Craves normality	Craving normality		
Important to attend 'normal' school			
People who fit in can adapt their behaviour to others	To conform or not to conform?		
Fitting isn't fun and she can be herself			
Try to be yourself			
Won't change who she is to be similar to others			
Her and friend do not conform to be like others			
Other girls with autism are conformist and reflect what normal girls do	Not like other girls with autism		
Different to others with autism			
Not as severe as most other girls with autism			

Autism makes her the odd one out **Not like the 'girly girls'** **Autism makes her different**	Being the odd one out	***(Continued: Identification with others*** *-A desire to identify with others* *-Being the odd one out)*	***(Continued: Desire for identification with others*** *-Being the odd one out* *-Different to other girls with autism)*
Wants to hide autism from others Hiding difficulties Embarrassed by difficulties	Hiding differences and difficulties	**Minimising differences** - Importance of being normal --Hiding differences and difficulties - Support draws unwanted attention	**Stigma surrounding difference and difficulty** -Identification of autism can lead to stigma
Individualised work makes her feel upset and different **Unwanted association with autism base** Dislikes that support draws attention	Support draws unwanted attention		
Adopting a label made her fit in Fitting in reduces isolation	Attempting to fit in		

Peers don't accept difference	Peers don't accept difference	***(Continued: Minimising differences***	***(Continued: Stigma surrounding***
Compares herself to other pupils with additional needs		*- Importance of being normal*	***difference and difficulty***
		--Hiding differences and difficulties	*-Identification of autism can lead to stigma)*
		- Support draws unwanted attention)	
Lacks skills to make friends	Lacking skills for social success	**Skills for social success**	**Social skills**
Lack of social skills makes her fear rejection and social awkwardness		-Value of social skills	-Working out social rules
Fears further failure at making friends		-Working out social rules	-Managing complex social dynamics
Unsuccessful attempts to approach new people		-Managing complex female friendships	
Verbal communication difficulties	Verbal communication difficulties		
Working out social rules	Working out social rules		
Worked out social rules through observation and spin off books by teens			
One key friend	Pressure and complication of many friendships		
Pressure of being popular not wanted			
Preference for small friendship group			
Fewer friends means less complication and			

conflict Dissonance between desire for belonging and lack of desire for more friends	*(Continued: Pressure and complication of many friendships)*	***(Continued: Skills for social success*** *-Value of social skills* *-Working out social rules* *-Managing complex female friendships)*	***(Continued: Social skills*** *-Working out social rules* *-Managing complex social dynamics)*
Managing complex social relationships **Managing fall outs with friends** Falling out over misunderstandings Fallings out over online messaging Attempts to understand dynamics of female friendship groups Managing frequently changing group structures	Challenges of maintaining complex female friendships		
			Support needed:
Consideration of groups/ partnerships in class Grouping and pairing in class affects awareness of how much she fits in	Consideration of groups/ pairings	**Creating supported social opportunities**	**Creating social opportunities**

Stress and rejection created by choosing groups in lessons	Impact of seating and groups on acceptance/ rejection	***(Continued: Creating supported social opportunities)***	***(Continued: Creating social opportunities)***
Seating plans can affect opportunities to make friends			
Seating plan changes are difficult			
Impact of seating and groups			
Safety and security	Safe social spaces	**Safe social spaces**	**Safe social spaces**
More relaxed with fewer people			
Student support centre as a safe space			
Art room is a safe space			
Awkwardness around seeking help with bullying	Support around bullying		
Opportunities to check in	Opportunities to talk things through	**Opportunities to talk it through**	
School talk from an adult with autism could encourage understanding of difference/ increase pupil confidence	Increase autism awareness in school	**Methods to increase autism awareness in school**	**Increase autism awareness throughout school**
Opportunities to learn from adult role models helps with social skills			

Secondary staff are helpful and inclusive	Importance of teacher awareness and understanding	**Remove barriers to learning**	***(Continued: Increase autism awareness throughout school)***
Teacher awareness and understanding			
Lack of understanding from teachers			
Staff awareness of what supports her			
Poor relationships and lack of understanding from staff			
Dislikes teachers who shout and moan			
Awareness of strengths gauged through test results	Teacher impact on feeling valued		
Awareness of personal attributes			
Work is de-valued			
Teachers acknowledge her strengths			
Desires independence from overprotective staff	Getting the right level of support		
Sometimes unsupported with social problems			
Would like more support in class			

Support and barriers to learning	Differentiation to increase lesson participation	***(Continued: Remove barriers to learning)***	***(Continued: Increase autism awareness throughout school)***
Clarity and presentation of information in class could be improved			
Difficulty understanding teacher			
Needs more visual explanation, repetition and processing time			
Needs time and praise from staff			
Special school outreach supports with social skills and friendships	Social opportunities	**Resources to support social skills and well-being**	**Resources to support social skills and well-being**
Social opportunities outside school			
Worked out social rules through observation and spin off books by teens	Resources to support with learning social rules		

Appendix 5: Development of phase two focus group/ interview schedule

Concept map for parent interview and focus group themes

Parent Interview and Staff focus group schedule

	Question	Prompt 1	Prompt 2
Social challenges of secondary school			
Sense of belonging	As I mentioned, a focus of this study is around the sense of belonging experienced by females with autism in school. What does 'sense of belonging' mean to you?		
	(FG) Think of a particular female pupil with autism in your school: In what ways do you feel she/ your daughter experiences a sense of belonging in school?		
		What are the implications of this?	
	What sort of barriers do you think restrict opportunities for her to belong?	Would this be the same for all female pupils with autism?	
Valued involvement	(FG) Think of the same pupil as previously:		

	Can you think of any instances that show she is valued?		
		By peers?	
		By staff?	What are the implications of this?
			Would this be the same for all female pupils with autism?
Fit	(FG) Think of the same pupil as previously: Can you think of any instances that suggest she fits in at school?		
		To what extent does she identify with others?	
		Are there any barriers around social interaction or forming friendships?	What are the implications of this?
			Would this be the same for all female pupils with autism?
	Can you think of any other social challenges for female pupils with autism in mainstream school?		

Feedback ways in which pupils felt they belong in school. **The following were identified by female pupils with autism as social challenges in school**.			
	What support and provision is needed to address the social challenges identified by female pupils with autism? (The following themes and quotes will be presented)		
	Being on the periphery "Well I'm just usually kind of like on the outside and I can step away and no one notices" "It's because people don't actually want me to be part of their group. Or maybe don't talk to me…"		

	"…these girly girls in my tutor…All they do is gymnastics and I obviously can't do it…"		
	Feeling unheard **"**If I was in the conversation at all I was always like… we always talked about what they wanted to talk about. Er… sometimes I wasn't listened to at all…" **Possessing unfavourable attributes** **"**I still feel like I'm annoying people sometimes... Like it's not my fault … I feel like it irritates people, like I irritate people"		
	Awareness and understanding of autism "I don't think they know that I have autism either… because um when I don't know what they're talking about, like I can't take		

	it in, it's really annoying and I have no clue what they're saying…and if I ask the teachers they won't understand, they'll just probably shout at me." "I guess it might be useful if they knew what… a bit more about what was helpful or not" "Most staff understand me, but I feel that some students actually don't understand what it is"		
	Desire for identification with others "… because I don't feel that I've got any friends that have actually got autism or something. So, if two of us had autism and were hanging together, we would actually get on a little bit… Cos we might be able to understand each other"		

	"… I've always wanted to find someone like who… a girl who's autistic and like, but not like really bad"		
	Being the odd one out "I don't feel I fit in with anyone as I have autism" "I'm not like most children with autism." "… I don't know why I'm more alternative, but it's kind of all I've ever felt."		
	Stigma surrounding difference and difficulty "I try not to let my autistic side of me show" "I don't want it to be obvious that I'm getting help…" "I keep it to myself when I find something difficult"		

	"If it's not like them, it's not normal. And if it's not normal, it's not ok."		
	Concerns about social skills "Because of my lack of social skills it gets pretty awkward pretty quickly and… I can't find a friend really that I can have a comfortable silence with" "I still wasn't entirely sure of like what to do in social situations all the time… I didn't learn very much when I was in primary school… So I did quite a lot of working it out and sort of… and it took like a while"		

Appendix 6: Summary sheet of pupil quotes for parent interviews and staff focus groups

Emerging themes from part 1 of doctoral thesis (November 2016)

Research Question 1 (a): In what ways do adolescent females with autism feel they feel they belong in school?

Theme/ sub-theme	Example pupil comments
Reciprocal friendships	"Like you know when you're with someone and you're comfortable with them, so when it's quiet it's not weird." "…I mean there were times where I'd only go into school because I wanted to see my friends."
Feeling safe and supported	"…we've always stuck together." "Yeah cos like once someone wasn't being nice and she was like 'calm down she's my friend'." "I go to a thing every Wednesday at lunch time… we sit there as a place to go and they chat about like how's your week's going and that's been a nice thing to do."
Encouragement and inclusion	"She goes 'Oh friends aren't important. I don't need them'. I'm like 'Yeah they are important'. Cos you can do things with them and it's not just you and nothing." "She like explains it better, puts it on the boards and then like if she comes and helps me, she will write it… like start me off."
Opportunities to 'talk it through'	"Like cos if it was something that was bothering you… you would maybe talk it though a bit. And sort of like depending on what it was, they might be able to help." "She talks to me and finds ways to… how to help me."
Having someone who understands	"…they both understand that actually it's not that I'm annoyed with them, it's that I'm very upset and they understand when

	I'm upset and understand when I've got things going on." "…we're quite similar cos she has anxiety as well. And she gets quite stressed as well so we talk about that."
Establishing and adhering to social expectations	"…it helps because then it's doing the sort of thing that they like. Then you'll know that they'll like what you're doing." "..but they can sort of adapt their, like, behaviour enough to sort of get al.ong with people."
Shared interests and values	"…sometimes me and X walked around campus… and that was enjoyable cos we talked about like music and stuff." "We laugh about a lot of stuff… the same things. We find anything funny. We have the same interests."

What support and provision is needed to address the social challenges identified by female pupils with autism?

Research Question 1 (b): In what ways do adolescent females with autism feel excluded at school?

Theme/ sub-theme	Example pupil comments
Being on the periphery	"Well I'm just usually kind of like on the outside and I can step away and no one notices" "It's because people don't actually want me to be part of their group. Or maybe don't talk to me…"
Valued involvement	**"**If I was in the conversation at all I was always like… we always talked about what they wanted to talk about. Er… sometimes I wasn't listened to at all…" **"**I still feel like I'm annoying people sometimes... Like it's not my fault … I feel like it irritates people, like I irritate people"
Awareness and understanding of autism	"I don't think they know that I have autism either… because um when I don't know what they're talking about, like I can't take it in, it's really annoying and I have no clue what they're saying" "Most staff understand me, but I feel that some students actually don't understand what it is"
Desire for identification with others	"… because I don't feel that I've got any friends that have actually got autism or something. So, if two of us had autism and were hanging together, we would actually get on a little bit… Cos we might be able to understand each other" "… I've always wanted to find someone like who… a girl who's autistic and like, but not like really bad"
Being the odd one out - Different to other females with autism	"I don't feel I fit in with anyone as I have autism" "I'm not like most children with autism." "… I don't know why I'm more alternative, but it's kind of all

	I've ever felt."
Stigma surrounding difference and difficulty	"I try not to let my autistic side of me show" "I don't want it to be obvious that I'm getting help…" "I keep it to myself when I find something difficult" "If it's not like them, it's not normal. And if it's not normal, it's not ok."
Concerns about social skills	"Because of my lack of social skills it gets pretty awkward pretty quickly and… I can't find a friend really that I can have a comfortable silence with" "I still wasn't entirely sure of like what to do in social situations all the time… I didn't learn very much when I was in primary school… So I did quite a lot of working it out and sort of… and it took like a while"

Appendix 7: Focus group facilitator notes

Welcome

Welcome and thank you for coming to this focus group. Each of you has been asked to participate because your point of view is very valuable and important. I know that you are very busy and I greatly appreciate your contribution to this project. This interview is not a test and there are no right or wrong answers. I'm very interested in what you think and feel.

It is important that you feel able to voice your own opinion, so please do not feel that you must agree with the majority. The more you share your views, the more useful the focus group will be.

Purpose

The purpose of this focus group interview is to determine your ideas and opinions around the social experiences for adolescent females with autism in mainstream school.

I am particularly interested in this population, as they are a minority group who are underrepresented in the research.

This is the second part of my research project. In the summer term I interviewed 8 females with autism in 3 schools across the South West. The females shared how they felt about their social experiences in school; specifically, the ways in which they feel they belong and the ways in which they feel excluded in school. In the second part of this focus group I will present the themes that emerged from the pupil interviews and seek your views on how the social challenges identified by the females can be addressed within school.

Guidelines

There are a few guidelines I would like to ask you to follow during the focus group:
- First, you do not need to speak in any particular order. When you have something to say, please do so.

-Second, please do not speak while someone else is talking. Sometimes it is tempting to 'jump in' when you feel strongly about something, but I would be grateful if you would refrain from doing so.
-Third, remember that there are a number of people in the group and that it is important that we obtain the point of view of each one of you.
- Finally, because we have limited time together, I may need to stop you and to redirect our discussion.
-Are there any questions?

Warm up

It would be really helpful if everyone could briefly introduce themselves and explain how they work with, or support a female pupil with autism.

Wrap-up

Unfortunately, we are close to being out of time. Once the interview gets started it moves at a fast pace, and there is less time to express your points of view than I would like. Let me attempt to summarize the key ideas I have heard. (Give 4-5 points).

Is there anything you would like to add to the summary?

Member check (if time)

E.g. At this point, I'm not looking for further discussion, just a general idea of how many of you feel a particular way. Again, please let me know your opinion. First, how many of you feel that…. (Suggestions around provision)

Closing statements

As we come to a close, I need to remind each of you that the recording will be transcribed, you will be assigned code names for the purpose of transcript and data analysis so that you will remain anonymous, and then the recording will be destroyed.

I ask that you refrain from discussing the comments of group members and that you respect the right of each member to remain anonymous. Are there any questions I can answer?

Thank you again for your contribution to this research. This was a very successful interview and your honest and insightful responses will be an enormous asset to my thesis. Again, I very much appreciate your involvement.

Appendix 8: Phase two ethical considerations

For parent consent from, see appendices for phase one ethical considerations.

Staff focus group consent form

Focus group consent form

Project title: *An exploratory study into the social experiences of adolescent females with autism in mainstream education*

I have been fully informed about the aims of the research and I understand what my participation will involve. **YES/NO**

I understand that all responses and information provided will be anonymised and used only for the purpose of this research project, which may include publications. **YES/NO**

I understand that participation in this research is entirely voluntary and I can withdraw consent at any time. **YES/NO**

I understand that all information provided will be confidential. **YES/NO**

……. …….

(Name) (Date)

……

(Signature)

Appendix 9: Stages of thematic analysis- Phase two

Table 14. Thematic analysis- parent interviews

Initial coding	Emerging themes	Review and refinement of themes	Final theme and sub-themes
Going overlooked/ getting lost	**Easily overlooked in a big school**	**School and classroom environment** -Easily overlooked in a big school -Unstructured social situations	**School and classroom environment** -Easily overlooked -Unstructured social situations
Overloaded by too many people			
Not valued by peers			
Not being believed by staff			
Unexpected situations	**Unstructured social situations**		
Preference for 1:1, rather than group situations			
Unstructured social situations			
Being retained in a lower year	**Development- playing catch up** -Being retained in a lower year -Being behind developmentally -Personal care and puberty	**Development- playing catch up** -Behind with development -Personal care and puberty	**Development- playing catch up** -Delayed development -Personal care and puberty
Being behind developmentally			
Personal care and puberty			

Minimising difference Unable to be true self Managing the rules and expectations set out by society: so as not to appear 'weird' Aiming for perfection/ pressure around achievement Aiming for perfection/ pressure around achievement	**Social norms and expectations** -Minimising difference -Unable to be true self -Managing the rules and expectations set out by society: so as not to appear 'weird' -Aiming for perfection/ pressure around achievement -Aiming for perfection/ pressure around achievement	**Social norms and expectations** -Aiming to be 'normal' -Societal expectation of adolescent females -Pressure around achievement	**Social norms and expectations** -Aiming to be 'normal' -Expectations of adolescent females -Pressure around achievement
Conversation skills Feeling that people aren't listening Being on the outside Vulnerable to others taking advantage	**Barriers to peer interaction** - Conversation skills - Feeling that people aren't listening - Being on the outside - Vulnerable to others taking advantage	**Barriers to peer interaction** - Conversation skills -Feeling left out - Managing female friendships	**Barriers to peer interaction** - Conversation skills -Feeling left out - Managing female friendships
Communication with teachers Staff awareness of autism Coming across rude	**Staff awareness and understanding** -Communication with teachers - Staff awareness of autism - Coming across rude	**Staff awareness and understanding** -Communication with teachers - Staff awareness of autism - Coming across rude	**Staff awareness and understanding** -Communication with teachers - Staff awareness of autism - Coming across rude

Engineered social opportunities	**Social opportunities**	**Semi-structured social opportunities**	**Semi-structured social opportunities**
Opportunities to find friends with similar interests			
Buddy system			
Support extending to girls with no diagnosis			
Practice and review social situations	**Planning and reflecting on social situations**	**Practice and review of social situations**	**Practice and review of social situations**
Time to prepare/ plan for social situations			
Early support for social skills			
Support with transition	**Support with transition**	**Preparation for secondary school**	**Preparation for secondary school**
Support with self-care and puberty	**Education around difference and diversity**	**Early education around difference and diversity**	**Early education around difference and diversity**
Early education around difference and diversity			
Whole class sessions on identity/'normality'			
Raising peer awareness			

Teacher training on autism	Teacher training on autism	**Raise staff awareness**	**Raise staff awareness**
Increased communication between staff	Increased communication between staff	-Staff training	-Staff training
Autism champion teacher	Autism champion teacher	**Autism champion teacher**	-Autism champion teacher
A safe space	**Opportunities to check in**	**Opportunities to check in**	**Opportunities to check in**
A key person	- A safe space	- A safe space	- A safe space
	- A key person	- A key person	- A key person

Table 15. Thematic analysis- staff focus groups

Initial coding	**Emerging themes**	**Review and refinement of themes**	**Final theme and sub-themes**
Worry about what others think	**Minimising difference**	**Minimising difference**	**Peer interactions** -Minimising difference -Social identity -Managing friendships -Communication
Not wanting TAs alongside			
Keeping quiet about worries/anxieties			
Female/ adolescent need to belong	**Identity/ fitting in**	**Social Identity**	
Late school moves			
Perception of being an outsider			
Not safe to be yourself			
Sense of identity			
Acceptance of autism			
Self-isolation	**Managing friendships**	**Managing friendships**	
Reluctance to widen friendship group			
Rules of friendship	**Communication**	**Social Communication**	
Acceptable female behaviour	**Attitudes towards females and autism** -Acceptable female behaviour	**Expected female behaviour**	**Society** -Expected female behaviour -Perceptions of autism -Vulnerability -Hidden social rules
Peer acceptance of 'extreme' behaviour	**Understanding of autism**	**Understanding of autism**	
Society's understanding of autism in females			
Autism perceived as a barrier			
Vulnerability due to copying 'typical female image'	**Vulnerability**	**Vulnerability**	
Vulnerable to online world			
Interests not age appropriate			
Hidden social rules	**Hidden social rules**	**Hidden social rules** - Understanding subtle social rules	

Classroom layout Unstructured time	**School Environment** -Classroom layout -Unstructured time	**School Environment** -Classroom layout -Unstructured time	**School environment** -Classroom layout -Unstructured time
Staff understanding	Staff understanding	**Staff understanding**	**Staff understanding**
Differential treatment from teachers	Differential treatment from teachers		
Late diagnosis impacts staff understanding	Late diagnosis impacts staff understanding	Late diagnosis impacts staff understanding	
Parent anxieties	Parent anxieties	**Parent anxieties**	**Parent anxieties**
Set responsibilities	Set responsibilities	**Individualised support**	**Individualised support**
Flexible and creative strategies	Flexible and creative strategies		
Pupils help develop strategies			
Treat each girl as an individual	Treat each girl as an individual		
Subtle social intervention	Subtle social intervention	**Discrete social intervention**	**Discrete social intervention**
Support to re-think social situations			
Use of media to teach social skills/ relationships	Use of media to teach social skills/ relationships		
Supporting peer understanding	**Education around difference and diversity**	**Education around difference and diversity**	**Education around difference and diversity**
Early education around disability and difference			
Whole school approach	**Whole school approach**	**Staff collaboration**	**Staff collaboration**
Using knowledge of other staff as a resource			
Consistency and routine embedded within school system			

Safe space/ checking in	**Checking in**	**Checking in**	**Checking in**
Mentoring			
Support for self-esteem			
Normalising			
Communication between staff and parents	**Home- school collaboration**	**Home- school collaboration**	**Home- school collaboration**
Easing parent anxieties			
Increasing wider awareness of autism in girls	**Increase wider awareness**	**Early intervention**	**Early intervention**
Early diagnosis and intervention			